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**Death as Poetics of Dislocation in the Global South:  
René Depestre, Maryse Condé, and Santiago Gamboa**

by

**Adriana Umaña**

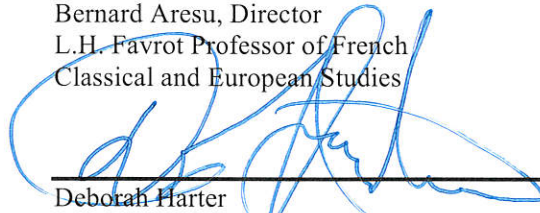
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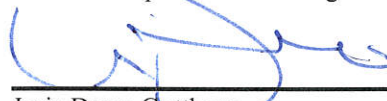
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## ABSTRACT

### Death as Poetics of Dislocation in the Global South: René Depestre, Maryse Condé and Santiago Gamboa

By Adriana Umaña

Fiction writing in the Global South—because of the region’s history and experience with colonialism—has been inextricably linked to questions of self-definition and collective representation. In a context of political and cultural domination, creative writers found themselves in the privileged but constrictive position of being the voice of a national community that was invested in articulating and affirming its cultural particularism. *Death as Poetics of Dislocation* surveys a gradual distancing from this position in the works of René Depestre, Maryse Condé and Santiago Gamboa and argues that representations of death function as the means to question notions of national exceptionalism and secure entry into a larger world literary space.

Whereas the Global South translates both a postcolonial condition and an emancipatory project, it can only accomplish its decolonial purpose when writers cease to locate themselves at the periphery and in reaction to former colonial centers. René Depestre’s reconfiguration of the zombie—a historically charged symbol embodying many of the nation’s troubles—extracts Haiti and Haitians out of a position of isolated victimhood at the margins and proposes instead a view of Haitians as transnational, diasporic heroes whose agency re-enters the world in order to heal it. Similarly, Maryse Condé has recourse to mourning to deconstruct a series of myths that have shaped collective narratives in the French West Indies, ideas that have restricted individual freedom. Through the destabilizing power of grief, she accords a newfound lucidity to characters who had been relegated to silence for the sake of recovering the voice of an idealized community, but whose experience of bereavement propels them to pursue a life unbound by the place of their birth. Violent crime in Santiago Gamboa’s novels gives the writer the necessary means to abandon the exceptionalist and tragic depictions of his native Colombia, which have characterized several generations of writers. His transnational portrayal of human cruelty conveys how contemporary experience cannot be contained within any one set of national borders, but straddles several geographical locations at the same time. Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa’s poetics of death highlight the global dimension of Haitian, Guadeloupean, and Colombian writing and challenge the very idea of homogeneous national cultures and literary traditions.

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In the midst of the solitude and silence that was necessary to write this dissertation, many voices supported my work. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Bernard Aresu whose generous mentorship has accompanied me from the first day I set foot within Rayzor Hall at Rice University. His faith in my intellectual questions gave me the confidence to continue when doubt assailed me; his thoughtful feedback allowed me to improve my arguments; and his graduate seminars provided the seeds for several of the issues I decided to explore in the dissertation. I encountered the richness of Francophone literature during his impassioned seminars and learned to recognize the echoes between distant places of the *Tout-monde* through his teaching. His encouragement and support to attend conferences, present my work, and challenge boundaries have shaped how I conceive a life in the academy.

I also want to thank Dr. April DeConick and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the opportunity to be part of the “Mapping Death” seminar. It was within that collaborative, creative, and interdisciplinary space that I found a way to transform and to articulate intuitions into research questions. Dr. DeConick helped me to understand the need to write everyday—no matter what—and she represents for me a powerful role model of someone who lives according to that discipline.

I would not understand the complex historical web of the Caribbean, in general, and Haiti, in particular—where race, religion and politics intersect—if it were not for Dr. Luis Duno-Gottberg. Nuestros cotejos en Duncan College me abrieron los ojos a aquella versión subversiva de la historia de Francia, Latinoamérica y el Caribe que no me habían enseñado en el Lycée Français Louis Pasteur de Bogotá. Gracias Luis.

I must acknowledge that without Dr. Nina Tucci I would not be here today. My undergraduate professor of French at the University of Houston—a wise woman whom I now consider as part of my own family—encouraged me to apply to graduate school.

My mother’s unrelenting faith in my capacity to accomplish what I undertake, my father’s passion for defending one’s ideas—which I first witnessed in admiration as a child and continue to respect as an adult—and todos los Umañas y Hossmans who never doubted that I could be the first in my family to earn a PhD were the necessary fuel to keep me writing. Natalia’s reminder that the sister she knew and loved would never give up was exactly what I needed to hear to return to writing the one and only time I was ready to surrender.

Tim, my 17<sup>th</sup> century mystic who continues to teach me how to hear the powerful voices of Pascal and Descartes at the heart of so many of my own academic questions, has seen me at my best and at my worst but has always stood firmly and lovingly by my side believing that I could do the work. He traveled with me to Haiti

and Guadeloupe—so far away literally and figuratively from his monasteries and libraries—to trace the hauntings of France’s colonial past. He is, in addition to the best partner I could have asked for in life, an amazing intellectual interlocutor.

Although Valentina is still too young to understand why *mamá* spent so many hours looking at a computer screen when all she wanted to do was to play and to read stories, I hope that she will be proud of me one day. May this completed dissertation serve as an example that she can accomplish whatever she sets her mind and heart to do in life.

Finally, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather Camilo who passed away while I was writing the chapter on mourning. It was only as I faced my own grief over his passing that I finally understood what I was trying to explain in Condé’s use of mourning in her fiction. My grandfather’s voice—like the voices of all the dead in Condé’s works—survives death because I can hear his encouraging words beyond the grave. From the afterlife, he summons me to seek truth, to dismantle false beliefs, and thus to be free to lead a life worth living.

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# Introduction

*Human beings can seldom wholly detach themselves in sentiment from present images of their past. If they become detached from their family or lineage, they become attached to their ethnic group or tribe or nationality or race or linguistic community and this entails regarding the past of these groups as their own.*

Edward Shills, *Tradition*

Death is ever-present in the literature of Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Colombia. Zombies, mourners, ghosts, funeral processions, violent crimes, unsolved murders, and foretold deaths are replayed endlessly in fiction as if to exorcise a difficult past, contain a convoluted present and prepare for a better future. While it is true that death is a question that has haunted men and women across time and space from the beginning of recorded history and is a concern that breathes life into the various ways religion, philosophy, and art have attempted to explain a limited human experience, the literature of the French West Indies and Colombia is particularly obsessed with representing the end of life. This dissertation started as a set of questions that sought to explain the prevalence of themes of death in a limited segment of texts that range from 1967 to 2012 taking as a premise that it had to be more than a perverse re-enactment of a historical tragedy. What could death allow these writers to convey beyond the political and historical burden to represent for the world an experience of slavery, colonialism, and exclusion? There had to be more, as it is often the case with art.



Art, when it achieves its goal, is universal. It goes beyond geographical, historical, linguistic, and political constraints. It enlarges the artist and his public. Its main goal is to transform reality and make tolerable—via the imagination—what otherwise would be unbearable. In the words of Jan Assman: “human beings are the animals that have to live with the knowledge of their death, and culture is the world they create so they can live with that knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> If literature, as the central component of culture, is what men and women have imagined as a parallel world to go beyond a harsh reality and escape their limitations, then writers in Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Colombia—if only concerned with their national past—would be returning to the imprisonment of their wound, so to speak, in order to rub salt into an unhealed sore. It just did not make sense that these beautiful texts, taking the reader into new poetic realms of possibility— like *Un Arc en ciel pour l’Occident chrétien* (1967)—delivering the lyrical proclamation of one woman’s freedom—like in *Moi Tituba sorcière* (1986)—, and articulating a common humanity—like in *Necropolis* (2009)—would be trapped into a cycle of eternal returns to pain, humiliation, and suffering.

To answer the question of whether there is more than meets the eye when it comes to narratives of death in the French Caribbean and Colombia, I turned to works by René Depestre from Haiti, Maryse Condé from Guadeloupe, and Santiago Gamboa from Colombia. Although they belong to separate generations and come from three different countries, they share a common preoccupation with representing death as a threshold and turn their backs on the leading aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Assman, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press,

principles of their national contemporaries. René Depestre questions *Négritude*, Maryse Condé condemns *Créolité*, and Santiago Gamboa does not set his novels in Colombia and refuses to participate in the leading *narconovela* obsession. Death represents a poetics of dislocation through which they break away from what had been a confining national space of literature, a stifling tradition. Like Shills suggests about tradition, human beings seldom detach themselves from images of their past and Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa are not an exception to this analysis. If their fictions take issue with the confining national and linguistic borders of Haitian, Guadeloupean and Colombia writing it is not as an outright dismissal of the past, but rather as a way of enlarging the tradition to which they belong. Laying claim to a larger and more global vision of history than their national predecessors, they dislocate from a position in the periphery.

Before I could bridge the linguistic and disciplinary gap that separates Depestre, Condé and Gamboa from one another and make the case for a common purpose in depicting death, first I had to map the traditions from where these writers emerged. If their work manifests a clear rupture from convention, it was essential to know what and whom Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa were rebelling against.

As I set out to map their traditions, I discovered that despite their geographical proximity and parallel histories, the linguistic and national borders that separate their writing kept them in a state of isolation in disciplines that seldom communicate with each other. Critics have confined René Depestre's works within a

very narrow Haitian canon and, after receiving considerable attention for his political involvement in Cuba and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, his work had been almost completely forgotten. Maryse Condé had been taken up by postcolonial critics in French and English (thanks to the commercial success of her translations and affinities with African American women writers like Tony Morrison), but remained only sporadically studied by Latin American specialists. Santiago Gamboa, whom I discovered within the book aisles at Gibert Joseph—a French bookstore located in the Boulevard Saint-Michel popular among college students in Paris—entered the radar of those interested in understanding the surge of a Latin American hard-boiled genre or “novela negra”, but tends to be cast aside by mainstream Latin American specialists as “too commercial to be serious.”<sup>2</sup> He is rarely studied outside detective novel specialists.

Drawing from contemporary Francophone and Latin American studies, political theory, history, postcolonial criticism, psychology, sociology, religious studies, and the recent moves to reread French literature from a global perspective, this dissertation combines a heterogeneous set of critical tools to enlarge the way literature from Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Colombia is studied. Close readings of the texts themselves are coupled with several theoretical concepts that transcend disciplinary borders.

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<sup>2</sup>This is criticism I encountered in the few articles devoted to his writing. It is summarized by Paula Andrea Marin Colorado “La Novela Colombiana reciente ante el mercado: Criticos contra lectores. Los casos de Mario Mendoza, Jorge Franco, y Santiago Gamboa” *Literatura: Teoria, Historia Critica*. Vol 14, Issue 1, June, 2012. 17-49.

For instance, René Girard's notion of the *pharmakos*—widely used within religious studies and sociology—plays a central role in illustrating how René Depestre releases the figure of the zombie from depictions of degradation. Theorizations of mourning in the fields of psychology and deconstruction help me make a case for Maryse Condé's use of mourning as a narrative strategy to undo collective myths. Freud and Derrida's diametrically opposed understandings of grief are central to my own conclusions. And without a historical and political grounding of Colombia and its literature, to argue that Santiago Gamboa's representations of crime rescue Colombian literature from a position of regional isolation would not be possible.

Frantz Fanon, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Edouard Glissant's invitation to take postcolonial studies beyond being a reaction *to* colonialism and create instead a new relationship *with* the world informs the readings of Depestre, Condé and Gamboa that follow. Narratives of death in the postcolonial milieu have often been viewed in terms of their denunciation of colonialism, their desire to return to an imagined and mythical past, their reparative impulse to reconstruct the world. Critics have underscored their connection to collective memory, political engagement, and literary theorization. Still others have pointed to the revitalization these texts effect on arid national literary landscapes. And yet Depestre, Condé and Gamboa's narratives of death are perhaps most interesting for their fundamental preoccupation with the present, the quotidian, and with the non-heroic dimension of their characters' choices. Instead of the past, they gesture to the immediate here

and now to forge a relationship with the world around them. The chapters that follow map this inclination.

Fanon, Khatibi and Glissant's call to take a larger perspective when it comes to the imagination in the former colonies is also answered by a new trend in Francophone studies that separates writing in the French language from the French nation. The controversial literary manifesto of *Pour une littérature-monde* which was published in *Le Monde* and later expanded by Gallimard, marks the beginning of this tendency while the appearance of *Global French: A New Approach to Literary History* indicates the consecration of this new direction in the field.<sup>3</sup> Containing forty-four critical essays by writers born outside of hexagonal France (including Maryse Condé), the manifesto *Pour une littérature-monde* liberates writing in French from cultural nationalism and demands equal status for those born in the former colonies of the French empire. These writers had been relegated in libraries, classrooms, and criticism into a "subclass" known as "francophonie," a term loaded with the legacy of empire and racial prejudices that placed them as a subgenre within the great works of the "real" French literature. A similar separation between the nation and literature is the goal of the editors of *Global French* who call for rethinking French literary history by challenging the idea of a "seamless unity between French as language, French as literature, and French as nation."<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Lebris, Jean Rouaud, *Pour une littérature monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007. Christie McDonald & Susan Rubin Suleiman, *French Global a New Approach to Literary History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Christie McDonald & Susan Rubin Suleiman, *French Global A New Approach to Literary History*, xix.

dissertation not only participates in this new orientation within French studies, but also expands it by including a writer who does not write in French but in Spanish.

To take three writers who are seldom put together raises a series of challenges. Borders—whether disciplinary, national or linguistic—are erected to protect against the angst of the unknown, to give meaning to the incommensurable, to contain what otherwise would be fleeting. By suggesting that these limits should be transcended in order to fully understand the creative worlds of Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa is to enter uncharted terrain. To claim that there are echoes within their creative worlds implies the need for a new roadmap that bypasses old borders. Can a new cartography of the literary imagination, not bound by geographical constraints, racial identities, linguistic tradition, and national affiliations emerge from these narratives of death and violence? Such are the questions that inform my analysis.

Finally, writing in the Global South proves closely bound up with politics. This is particularly true in Haiti, Colombia and France's overseas departments. The weight and shadows of a history of colonialism and the present-day repercussions of policies grounded on neoliberal values and capitalism are too large and too visible to ignore. Injustice, inequality, and poverty both within these nations and with respect to the rest of the world continue to infuse what its inhabitants dream of, hope for, and rebel against. Whether giving voice to those who had been silenced for years, or taking advantage of their own position of power as members of an educated and moneyed elite in the "lettered city," writers could not be neutral

bystanders.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, moments of political crisis were inextricably connected to the flourishing and consolidation of a national literary consciousness in these regions. In the island of Haiti, the American invasion of 1915 heralds the appearance of its most important literary texts. In Colombia, the politically unstable period known as “La Violencia” brings about a sense of national unity—in what had been until then four regional and separate literary landscapes. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, France’s surrender of its former African colonies after World War II awakens a sense of rebellion and questioning among its writers. Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*—the foundational text of the French Caribbean—cannot be understood outside of these political events. It is within such a union of politics and the imagination that René Depestre, Maryse Condé, and Santiago Gamboa write fiction and aspire to enter what Pascale Casanova calls “the World Republic of Letters”.

My focus on three contemporary writers from Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Colombia does not claim, of course, to represent the entirety of the Global South or even their countries of origin exhaustively. My intention is solely to trace the contours of a new tendency within the Global South: an inclination to dislocate from a national frame of reference that has—for too long—guided and shaped perceptions of literature in the fields of Francophone, Caribbean and Latin American studies. *Death as poetics of dislocation* brings to the foreground how Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa endeavor to enter world literature by rejecting marks of difference grounded on national particularisms or cultural exceptionalisms. Their

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<sup>5</sup> Angel Rama, *La Ciudad Letrada*. Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1984.

creative approach is based on the awareness that writing in Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Colombia not only grew in part out of a Western literary tradition, but continues to converse with that tradition.

Chapter one “Dislocation and the Global South” spells out what is meant by the concept of Global South in order to link this geopolitical construct and emancipatory project with four aesthetic movements: Haitian *Indigénisme*, *Négritude*, *Créolité* and *Realismo Mágico*. The chapter then turns to discourses on globalization and how the latter reshape the concept of World Literature. Finally, it explores dislocation as the emergence of a global, literary consciousness. Chapter two “The Third Space of Death: Depestrian Zombies and Creolization” surveys how the figure of the zombie in Haitian literature originally depicted national degradation. Relying on the concept of the *pharmakos*, the chapter then shows how Depestre rescues this figure from its marginal representation as victim, revaluing the zombie through a set of positive attributes, qualities that anticipate a post-national or transnational mode of being. Chapter three “Condean Mourning: From Collective Myth to Individual Lucidity” considers different theories of mourning to argue that Maryse Condé resorts to ritual as a means to deconstruct a series of collective narratives in the French West Indies. Through the destabilizing power of grief, the writer restores freedom and lucidity to the individual in a society that has relegated individuality to a secondary role for the sake of recovering the voice of the community. Chapter four “Santiago Gamboa’s Poetics of Failure” locates the writer within a generation who breaks with the poetics of *Realismo Mágico* to then maintain that Gamboa extends this rupture even further. The writer’s abandonment



of the exceptionalist and tragic depictions of Colombia in his novel's representation of the world of crime across the *Tout-Monde* betray his desire to participate in what Edouard Glissant's 1997 neologism conveys. A vision and awareness that all the cultures and traditions of the world are simultaneously, and at accelerating speeds, changing each other and themselves through an encounter with the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> While Depestre, Condé and Gamboa remain very different writers in their poetics of death— mobilizing zombies, mournful settings, and the world of crime— they embody a similar *élan* towards a global consciousness.

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<sup>6</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997. « J'appelle Tout-monde notre univers tel qu'il change et perdure en changeant et, en même temps, la 'vision' que nous en avons... »

# Chapter One

## Dislocation in the Global South

Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons,  
and are often defended beyond reason or necessity.  
Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.

Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*

One of the most urgent and difficult tasks for writers in the Global South has been to produce creatively and freely while carrying forward a literary tradition rife with questions of belonging, issues of collective representation, and the weight of historical memory. In the French-speaking Caribbean, for instance, writers cannot enter the literary field without acknowledging the footsteps of their tutelary ancestor: Aimé Césaire. Césaire's political, aesthetic and philosophical legacy looms large: weighing in, measuring up, and judging the voices of the newcomers. Gabriel Garcia Marquez occupies a similar position for the Latin American writer. Magical realism, with its unparalleled critical and commercial success, became a curse and a blessing: putting the region's literature on the world map, while at the same time, paradoxically, limiting its creative arena and reinforcing political and cultural stereotypes about Latin Americans. Because writing has been from the outset an exercise in self-definition, coeval with political and cultural battles for independence, many of the emerging postcolonial literatures in the Americas felt the need to restrict their view of the world to their specific geographies and particular colonial histories. René Ménil captures this anxious impulse towards authenticity

and self-definition in the context of the French West Indies with its implications extending to Global South writing in general, when he writes:

Nous cherchons notre vrai visage. Nous avons suffisamment condamné la littérature artificielle qui prétend nous en donner l'image: poètes attardés, héros du poncif, superstitieux faiseurs d'alexandrins, très lâches diseurs de rien. Narcisse martiniquais où donc te reconnaitras-tu ? Plonge tes regards dans le miroir du merveilleux : tes contes, tes légendes, tes chants. Tu y verras s'inscrire, lumineuse, l'image sûre de toi-même.<sup>7</sup>

[We are looking for our true visage. We have sufficiently condemned false literature that claims to give us a reflection of ourselves: poets behind the times, heroes of conventional clichés, superstitious crafters of alexandrines, coward sayers of nothing. Martinican Narcissus, where will you recognize yourself? Plunge your gaze into the mirror of the marvelous: your tales, your legends, your songs. You will see inscribed therein, luminous, the accurate image of yourself.]

While searching for their true identity, writers worked from a set of self-imposed borders. They gladly nurtured an isolated position in the periphery, diving into the region's "tales", "legends," and "songs," almost to the exclusion of everything else, as a way of establishing an independent voice. For many writers in French and Spanish-speaking America, this position was a necessary step to carve a place in literature. Writers confined their narratives to the national boundaries and thus renounced, so to speak, to a larger and more global vision that included stories connecting them to the world beyond their own colonial history. To complicate things even further, this search for an authentic creative expression that affirms both a separate identity and a distinct aesthetic inclination emerged historically in tandem with the desire to be accepted as equals in the world literary arena. These

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<sup>7</sup> René Ménil, "Préface," in Patrick Chamoiseau, *Manman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse*, Paris: Editions Caribéennes, 1982, p. 4. (First appeared in *Tropiques* No. 13, Oct. 1941) (My translation)

two apparently incompatible impulses would later give rise to the ideological conflict that every writer in the Global South has to face: either to embrace cosmopolitanism or to retreat into nativism.

The reactive, prescriptive, and delimited creative space described above would prove too small for some novelists. Through their narratives of death, René Depestre (1926), Maryse Condé (1937) and Santiago Gamboa (1965) express a growing desire to break free from the confines of the national and postcolonial narrative. Their work allows us to map a steady liberation from these self-imposed borders and to follow the evolution of a new consciousness that transcends national limits. A cosmopolitanism from below—that does not forget the local—now traces the movement away from questions of national political consciousness and collective identity towards an interest in the possibility of transnational affiliations and individual freedom. A desire to be included in what Pascale Casanova calls “The World Republic of Letters,” an international literary space where writers are free to call themselves heirs of writers from every nation and every linguistic tradition, and thus proclaim their creative autonomy<sup>8</sup>. For it is only within this space of freedom, from this independence from national political concerns, that the writer is able to exert his creative freedom.

If literature, as Mario Vargas Llosa has maintained, is not a faithful mirror of reality, but rather a magical mirror, one that penetrates beyond our appearances to reveal our secrets, as well as our instincts, fears and desires in order to transmute

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<sup>8</sup> Pascale Casanova, *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. Paris: Seuil, 1999.

our pain and human limitations, then narratives of death for Depestre, Condé and Gamboa attempt to exorcise the dislocation of postcoloniality.<sup>9</sup> That is, writing about death allows these writers to imagine alternatives to victimhood. Individual stories that while still expressing a desire for radical change and dissatisfaction with the ways of the globalized world also introduce characters who feel less like outcasts from the Global South and more like integral parts of the *Tout-Monde*, Edouard Glissant's poetic vision of planetary globalization that sidesteps the either positive or negative views that this term has taken within academic circles. The term attempts to break down rigidly conceived binary concepts that have explained what happened and continues to happen when different cultures are put in contact with each other. It also describes the accelerated interaction that has been taking place since European colonial expansion and has been producing unpredictable effects that cannot be described in terms of a closed synthesis but rather in what Glissant calls *Créolisation*: the never-ending process where different cultures and individuals meet, exchange, and change each other in unexpected ways. Under such a vision, characters in the Global South are conceived less as victims trapped in the historical legacy of colonialism and more like agents of a world in the making. No longer limited by the boundaries of the nation-state, ceasing to decry what has been called a European epistemology, and voicing a transnational consciousness, their writing marks the end of seeking an impossible cultural authenticity that would validate their literary existence to in turn herald the creative freedom provided by the awareness that what happens in one part of the globe has reverberations the

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<sup>9</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, *El Viaje a la ficción, El mundo de Juan Carlos Onetti*, 29-30.

world over. Death as both the ultimate margin and most radical unknown serves as a narrative strategy for Depestre, Condé and Gamboa to imagine living without borders and exercising the writer's yearning for absolute liberty in his craft.

### 1.1 Global South

The idea of the "Global South" captures two important dimensions. A geopolitical situation born from historical and economic conditions of colonialism, on the one hand, and an emancipatory project that targets the consequences of that ordering of the world, on the other hand. As a concept, it replaces the Cold War era notion of the "Third World," a metaphor describing the under-development, poverty, and oppression that characterized the many regions that did not fit into an ideological partition of the world into two dominant powers, NATO and the Communist bloc.<sup>10</sup> While the "Global South" refers to zones that tend to fall into predictable geographical locations, it is not a directional designation in the traditional sense. It includes former colonies in Asia, Africa and the Americas, while some parts of the Global South are actually found in the northern hemisphere, in the urban ghettos of Europe and the United States, which are sites of immigration and poverty. The Global South highlights the planetary divisions performed by Europe's

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<sup>10</sup> Alfred Sauvy coined the term "Third World" in an article that appeared in *l'Observateur* in August of 1954 to designate those countries that were neither aligned with NATO nor with the Communist bloc during the Cold War. It was inspired by the designation of the "Tiers Etat" during the French Revolution. Sauvy reminds the reader that while the world is divided into two sections during the Cold War, there is a third that remains forgotten despite its importance. « Nous parlons volontiers des deux mondes en présence, de leur guerre possible, de leur coexistence, etc. oubliant trop souvent qu'il en existe un troisième, le plus important [...] C'est l'ensemble de ceux que l'on appelle [...] les pays sous-développés [...]. Ce Tiers Monde ignoré, exploité, méprisé [...] veut, lui aussi, être quelque chose. »

colonial program: the East-West boundary line imagined during the Renaissance, and the North-South distinction that emerged from Enlightenment thinking.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1.1 Global South as Condition

As a colonial and postcolonial condition, the Global South is governed by the structures of power and control that emerged during the Spanish, French, Portuguese and British colonial conquests, which have continued to shape current geopolitics. This is what Anibal Quijano has termed “coloniality of power”. For Quijano the social configurations, along with the moral and ideological justifications that allowed Europe to be in a privileged position of control of the world’s trade started in 1492 and have continued to shape the rules of commerce, politics, and knowledge into the present age.<sup>12</sup> He argues that the social classification of the world was built upon an idea of race born during colonial conquest, “a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others” and artificially created the notion of European superiority.<sup>13</sup> Seeing themselves as superior to the rest of the world and as the exclusive producers of

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account on how the Renaissance humanists shaped the East/West divide that would in turn ground the formation of Western identity see Nancy Bishaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. This division traced its origins to the splitting of the Roman Empire and was later emphasized by the 11<sup>th</sup> century division of the Christian churches. More recently, the East-West divide translated the ideological partition of the world in terms of capitalism (US and western Europe) and communism (USSR and eastern Europe).

<sup>12</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepentla: Views From the South* 1 (3): 533–580.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 533. “The idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a know history before the colonization of America...Social relations founded on the category of race produced new historical social identities in America –Indians, blacks, and mestizos- and redefined others. Terms such as *Spanish* and *Portuguese*, and much later *European*, which until then indicated only geographic origin ... acquired from then on a racial connotation in reference to the new identities.”

knowledge and rationality, Europeans imagined a completely new frame of reference in regards to time and modernity, with themselves at the center as sole protagonists.<sup>14</sup> This belief legitimated modes of exploitation that were inherently unjust, but possessed the backing of a European Enlightenment logic that saw itself as a bearer of light, a liberator of a primitive way of being. The moral superiority of Europe was grounded on what some scholars have called an identity discourse of modernity, in which Europe represented itself at the center of Human History, illuminating the so-called newly discovered territories.<sup>15</sup> The rules of the game were thus invented to Europe's advantage (later to include the United States) and, more importantly, at the expense of the colonized world, in what Eduardo Galeano calls the *Lockean moment*, when human liberty was defined in terms of capitalism.<sup>16</sup> By imposing its view of the world by force (the sword and the cross) and foreclosing most native forms of knowledge and culture, Europe prepared the scene to pillage the resources of the Americas.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 541. "The Europeans generated a new temporal perspective of history and relocated the colonized population, along with their respective histories and cultures, in the past of a historical trajectory whose culmination was Europe."

<sup>15</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, "Modernity and Periphery", *Beyond Dichotomies*, ed. Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi. SUNY UP. 2002, 23-28. "The idea of modernity, I suggest, was one of the chief tropes through which Europe constructed itself as center, as *the* center, and the rest of the planet as a -its- periphery... I have found quite helpful to think about modernity as an *identity discourse*, as Europe's (or the white world's) identity discourse as it assumed global dominance."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*. New York: Nation Books, 2009, 158. "Thanks to Locke we know that God bestowed the world on its legitimate proprietors, 'the industrious and rational'. It was Locke who laid the philosophical groundwork for human freedom in all its dimensions: free enterprise, free trade, free competition, free hiring and firing. And the freedom to invest. While he was writing *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the philosopher did his part for human understanding by investing his savings in Royal African Company stock. That firm, owned by the British Crown and by 'the industrious and rational,' hunted and captured slaves in Africa and sold them in America."



Despite proclaiming and securing political independence from Europe at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the successful revolutions led by Toussaint Louverture and Jacques Dessalines in Haiti and by Simon Bolivar and Francisco de Paula Santander in Colombia inaugurated another form of dependence.<sup>17</sup> Culturally, the new nations and their inhabitants were caught in the legacy of colonialism: the sole route for gaining access to wealth and social status within the structures of power inherited from colonial rule was through the emulation of European values, which were seen as ideals to be achieved. Frantz Fanon's description in *Peau Noire Masques Blancs* of the psychological alienation of the colonized in Martinique also applies to those living in the newly formed countries in the Americas during the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued to be true well after political independence. Having imparted a system of values that were fully internalized, Europe maintains its privileged position in the American imagination. When early 19<sup>th</sup> century writing explores the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, Europe continues to stand for advancement and progress while any condemnation of its values is equated with barbarism. In other words, progress in

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<sup>17</sup> Guadeloupe, Maryse Condé's place of birth, follows a very different historical trajectory since it is still under French rule and is an Overseas Department of France. Unlike Haiti (1803) and Colombia (1810), it failed to gain independence in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century after Louis Delgrès could not secure independence against the Napoleonic forces that were launched in 1802 to reinstate slavery in the Caribbean colonies. Guadeloupe was under British rule between 1810 and 1816, after which, it was returned to France under the Treaty of Vienna (1815). Slavery was abolished in 1848 (1793 in Haiti and 1851 in Colombia). In 1946, under the leadership of Aimé Césaire (then mayor of Fort-de-France, Martinique), Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, and La Réunion were converted into Overseas Departments of France. More recent independence movements have failed. Culturally, Guadeloupe has articulated an ambiguous independence from Paris. On the one hand, it shares a nationalized system of public schools with a curriculum determined in Paris, but geographically, ethnically, and historically it is very distant from hexagonal France.

these young nations can only be achieved through the emulation of Europe's enlightenment program.

Two works published in Argentina and Haiti are excellent examples of how this primordial colonial conflict extends well into independence: Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* (1845) and Émeric Bergeaud's *Stella* (1858). These foundational novels of Argentina and Haiti replay the Manichean allegory of good and evil, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion through two main characters who each personifies European and indigenous values respectively, and where European civilization always wins.<sup>18</sup> Although these nations declared themselves politically independent from Europe, they remained under the cultural influence of their former colonial centers. The inhabitants of the Global South not only saw their land and ways of life taken from them during European rule, but also underwent the colonization of their imagination. The nations they imagined for themselves after independence mimicked the colonial models. Literature, religion, and philosophy reflected an almost absolute idealization of European culture while rejecting or ignoring popular and indigenous forms of expression. Such a choice reflects an "imposed condition of receptivity" that Pratt describes as the problem of the dynamics of power of coloniality. The latter "deprives the society of the chance to create forms of self-

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed look at how these two historical novels equate European values with progress see the translator's introductions in: Bergeaud, Emeric, Adriana Umaña Hossman, and Luis Duno-Gottberg, *Stella*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2014. Sarmiento, Faustino, Roberto González Echevarría. *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

understanding of its own making, grounded in its own reality and history.”<sup>19</sup> From this position of cultural alienation, everyday realities were underestimated as unworthy of artistic exploration, while those in positions of authority persisted in rebuilding the unequal distribution of power they had just managed to break free from. Literature looked to Europe for models in terms of both form and content, while control remained in the hands of a small elite, which replaced the colonizers and recreated modes of governance made in Europe. It is this condition that the other dimension of the “Global South,” as a struggle, seeks to transcend.

### **1.1.2 Global South as Project**

For the “Global South” is also a contestatory project. It represents both a challenge to the status quo and a new vision of relationships emerging from the regions that have been relegated to the sidelines of history. By highlighting the inequalities erected by the coloniality of power, writers from the Global South have called into question the ways in which the world has been organized and partitioned. By taking issue with the assumptions that fashioned a Eurocentric universe based on racial classifications, an understanding of modernity, definitions of liberty, and ideals of beauty, they have been unlocking alternative epistemologies.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pratt, 31.

<sup>20</sup> This is how Mignolo has describes his intellectual project. In “I am Where I Think” he explains that “Decolonizing Western epistemology means stripping it of the pretense that it is the point of arrival and guiding light of all kinds of knowledges. In other words, decolonizing knowledge is not rejecting Western epistemic contributions to the world. On the contrary, this implies appropriating it because of its universal value while at the same time rejecting the implied pretense that because of its global contribution it will be *the*

*Négritude*, Haitian *Indigénisme*, Latin American *Realismo Mágico*, and West Indian *Créolité* were some of the ways creative writers from the Global South responded to their society's alienation and proclaimed a return to authenticity, a return to the native land. But it was a problematic return since these artistic positions contain an exceptionalist discourse loaded with essentialist tendencies in their attempt to describe and sort out the coexistence of two clashing realities: the idealized frame of mind imported from the cultural centers in Europe (snow in December, the beauty of blue eyes, narratives of “nos ancêtres les Gaulois”) and the one lived everyday (tropical weather during Christmas, darker complexions, erasure of pre-colonial history). Furthermore, these returns to more authentic representations—whether in terms of origins (*Indigénisme*), race (*Négritude*), or culture (*Realismo Mágico* and *Créolité*)—remain reactive postures. They do not constitute what Adolfo Alban Achinte calls *re-existence* or what Abdelkebir Khatibi describes as *pensée autre*, and which we will address in the following chapters.<sup>21</sup>

These reactive positions not only replay the dichotomies of coloniality and postcoloniality, but they also prolong it, in so far as the movement's definitions are

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totalitarian universal system of knowledge, ruling out the possibility of pluriversal, dialogic, and epistemically democratic ones.” Walter Mignolo, “I Am Where I Think: Epistemology and the Colonial Difference,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 8:2, 1999, pp. 235-245

<sup>21</sup> Adolfo Albán Achinte, “Pedagogías de la Re-existencia: Artistas indígenas y afrocolombianas: Entre las memorias y cosmovisiones estéticas de la resistencia”, en *Arte y estética en la encrucijada descolonial* (W. Mignolo y Z. Palermo, Ediciones del Signo, 2009) “Concibo la re-existencia como los dispositivos que las comunidades crean y desarrollan para inventarse cotidianamente la vida y poder de esta manera confrontar la realidad establecida por el proyecto hegemónico que desde la colonia hasta nuestros días ha interiorizado, silenciado y visibilizado...La re-existencia apunta a descentrar las lógicas establecidas para buscar en la profundidades de las culturas...las claves de formas organizativas y estéticas que permitan dignificar la vida y reinventarla para permanecer transformándose.” (455).

based on colonial terms. As Pratt warns, “(t)he postcolonial optic continues to colonize to the degree that it identifies everything with respect to European-dominated power relations, as if coloniality were the only axis along which ex-colonial or colonial places could be known.”<sup>22</sup> For while the effects of Europe’s historical colonial project cannot be undone, after identifying its legacies, the challenge is to go beyond an initial revolt and towards constructing other possibilities. In the words of Khatibi:

Ce constat marque une interrogation, c’est-à dire un événement inévitable, qui n’est ni un désastre ni une bénédiction, mais la condition d’une responsabilité qui reste encore à prendre en charge, Au delà du ressentiment et de la conscience malheureuse. Cet au-delà n’est pas un don accordé par une volonté seulement révoltée ; il est un travail sur soi, un travail permanent afin de transformer ses souffrances, ses humiliations et ses dépressions dans la relation à l’autre et aux autres.<sup>23</sup>

[This awareness marks an interrogation, that is, an unavoidable event, which is neither a curse nor a blessing, but rather the condition of a responsibility that has not yet been accepted, Beyond resentment and alienation. This beyond is not a gift given by a revolted will; it is an inner work, an ongoing commitment to transform one’s suffering, one’s humiliations and depressions in the relationship to the other.]

This responsibility means no longer denouncing the past, but rather assuming the responsibility for creating a different reality by forging new relationships with others, including the former colonizers, free from alienation and its regrettable sense of inferiority. In *The Creolization of Culture*, Françoise Lionnet reminds the reader that

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<sup>22</sup> Maryse Louise Pratt, “In the Neocolony: Destiny, Destination and the Traffic in Meaning”, Moraña, Mabel, Enrique D Dussel, and Carlos A Jáuregui. *Coloniality At Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 460.

<sup>23</sup> Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel*, Paris: Denoël, 1983.

Fanon opposed “actional” to “reactional” thinking to escape from the circularity of dialectical negation, which remains dependent on the system that decolonizing or decolonial thinking is trying to undo. In other words, decolonization requires a revolution in politics, thought, and language all simultaneously, and it is much more than a reaction against colonialism. Rather, it is an act of self-assertion and self-creation.<sup>24</sup>

This explains why in addition to writing about their place of birth and the former colonial centers it becomes imperative for Depestre, Condé and Gamboa to include distant places, locations that were ignored by a previous generation of writers who were locked in a cycle of duality between the center and the periphery. By uncoupling their view of the world from the postcolonial optic, the writers are proposing a different dynamic and another form of relationship, as well as a view of the world that extends well beyond the colonial frontier that had imprisoned their predecessors.

As the following chapters will show, Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa’s narratives of death shift from the repudiation of colonialism and criticism of postcolonial legacies and towards the creative affirmation of their character’s individual liberty as they travel into landscapes rarely seen before. By doing so, they take the traditions that made possible their writing, that is French Caribbean and Latin American literature, towards new spaces. There, in a more neutral territory that evades the duality of colonialism, they re-create the *Tout-Monde*, the globalized vision of a *whole-world* poetically theorized by Edouard Glissant in which events in one of its parts reverberate across all of them. If their writing travels

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<sup>24</sup> Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet, “Introduction,” *The Creolization of Theory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 17.

outside of Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Colombia and if their characters hail not only from Europe and the Americas, but from remote places such as Cape Town (*Histoire de la femme cannibale*), Bangkok (*Plegarias Nocturnas*), and Katanga (*Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'occident chrétien*), it is not to proclaim a form of nomadism that denies the importance of place, but rather to overcome a postcolonial and dualistic view of the world. In other words, their narratives do not conceive characters as anchorless wanderers who dismiss the natural attachment to their homeland, but suggest that the reality of the native land cannot be circumscribed to the borders drawn during colonial times. Instead, it becomes elaborately entangled with what happens in even the most distant of places. And yet, this artistic intuition of the interconnectedness of local and global events would be preceded however by other equally important moments, imaginative strategies, that must first proclaim their separation and rejection of coloniality to then transcend it.

## **1.2. Imaginative Strategies**

### **1.2.1. Haitian Indigénisme**

*Indigénisme* was an aesthetic response to two forms of colonial intervention in Haiti. It appeared as an immediate reaction to the US invasion (1915-1934) and as a more general refusal to prolong the country's cultural submission to ideas imported from its former colonial center, France. As an amorphous and elusive concept,

the best way of seizing the essence of what (*Indigénisme*) stood for is to see the movement as a cluster of ideas and feelings generated by a deep-seated conviction of cultural rootlessness and dislocation...

obsessed by the need for cultural wholeness, for the artist to be the voice of a community.<sup>25</sup>

The movement was led by Jean Price-Mars, who articulated its main tenets in *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928), a work of ethnography that was to have a tremendous impact on the *Négritude* movement across three continents. It would also influence subsequent literary traditions in Haiti and the rest of the Global South.

As Price-Mars notes in the preface to the work, his aim, and by extension the aim of the movement that was born from his ideas, was to restore the importance and significance of local folklore in the eyes of its people. It was also to include into ethnography the particularities of Haitian experience thus combating what he calls the “collective *bovarysme*” that places Haitians in the perilous position of being victims of foreign domination.<sup>26</sup> *Indigénisme* reconnects Haitian culture with its African past, gives Vodou a pivotal role in defining its identity, and combats the Francophile tendency that had characterized literary productions.

It is important to remember that *Ainsi parla l'oncle* appeared during the American occupation, when President Woodrow Wilson had ordered the U.S. marines to invade Haiti as part of the Monroe Doctrine to protect American financial and strategic positions in the island nation. The occupation left an indelible mark on literary production as it forced writers to question Haitian institutions and their own place in society as part of the learned elite. By conceiving themselves other

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Dash, *Literature and Ideology in Haiti, 1915-1961*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Bovarysme will be discussed at length in the chapter devoted to Depestre. It is derived from a character of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel by Gustave Flaubert *Madame Bovary* and entails a form of alienation from reality, that is, to believe oneself other than what one really is. For Price-Mars Haitians who believed themselves to be “colored French men” were denying their national difference.



than what they were, Price-Mars had explained, Haitians who thought themselves as “colored Frenchmen” were mimicking traditions imposed from Europe, submitting themselves to the authority of others and failing to consider their more immediate realities.<sup>27</sup> Michael Dash notes that throughout the nineteenth century the Haitian elite, or the “New World Hildalgos,” as he calls them, had “protected (their) self-esteem by closely identifying with images of a refined, erudite and benevolent Europe” against the powerful presence of the United States to the North.<sup>28</sup> By invoking its affinity and proximity with French culture, the Haitian elite also sought to counter the images of savagery and cannibalism that permeated American accounts of Haitians.<sup>29</sup> But the American occupation proved the futility of such a Eurocentric vision in defending itself against foreign invasion. This crisis became a fertile moment for Haitian letters as it made possible the birth of modern Haitian literature.

*Indigénisme* not only crystallized the need to distance Haiti from French cultural values, but also paved the way for the exploration of Vodou as a Haitian religion in its own right, worthy to be included in art. Vodou had been absent from literature as it was considered a sign of lack of civilization and proof of African barbarism. Gerarde Magloire-Danton calls the revalorization of Vodou an epistemic

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, New York: Parapsychology Foundation Inc., 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988, 15.

<sup>29</sup> This is the time when the figure of the zombie, as an archetype for Haitians, gains unprecedented momentum both inside and outside the country. This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

change towards African-derived belief systems.<sup>30</sup> It is only after Price-Mars's anthropological and ethnological research in Haiti that the legacy of colonial history in Haitian society and the African origins of Vodou began to be studied academically.<sup>31</sup> Despite the brief existence of *La Revue Indigène* (1927-1928), the journal that brought together writers Emile Roumer, Philipe Thoby-Marcelin, Jacques Roumain, and Carl Brouard among others, its contribution marked a radical shift within Haitian letters. The African past became a rich subject matter for national poetry where European forms and inspiration were banished in the name of cultural authenticity. Philipe Thoby-Marcelin's poem *Sainement* (1926) illustrates this new orientation:

Jurant un éternel dédain aux raffinements européens,  
 Je veux désormais vous chanter: révolutions, fusillades, tueries  
 Bruit de coco-macaque sur des épaules noires,  
 Mugissements du lambi, lubricité mystique de vaudou...  
 Me dépouiller de tous oripeaux classiques  
 et me dresser nu, très sauvage  
 et très descendant d'esclaves

[Swearing eternal scorn for European refinements,  
 from now on I want to sing you:  
 revolutions, executions, killings  
 Noise of coco-macaque on black shoulders.  
 Groans of the conch shell, mystic voluptuousness of Vodou...  
 I would strip myself of all classical trappings  
 and stand naked, very much the savage,  
 and very much the descendant of slaves.]<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, Haitian writers' preoccupation with authenticity and a return to roots, while anchoring works within the Haitian reality, also produced a nationalist,

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<sup>30</sup> Gerarde Magloire-Danton, "Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars: Revolution, Memory, Humanism", *Small Axe* 9.2, 2005, 150-170.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in Laurence A. Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 29.

racist discourse that served the ideology of François Duvalier's "noirisme".<sup>33</sup> René Depestre deplores the fate of Price-Mars' ideas in the hands of Duvalier by writing in 1968 that

La *négritude* comme Duvalier et ses complices l'appliquent depuis dix ans en Haïti n'est autre chose qu'une forme antillaise de fascisme, un néo-racisme totalitaire dont les principales victimes sont les millions de paysans et de travailleurs noirs d'Haïti.<sup>34</sup>

[*Négritude* as Duvalier and his accomplices have been practicing it for the last ten years in Haiti is nothing more than a West Indian form of fascism, a totalitarian neo-racism whose victims are the millions of black Haitian farmers and workers.]

The discourse that helped bring into focus the importance of local folklore and Vodou traditions, also cemented the authoritarianism of nearly thirty years of a regime of dictatorship.<sup>35</sup> Literary creativity saw its freedom curtailed by political needs and aspirations to power. Notwithstanding, Haitian *Indigénisme* would provide the vital epistemic change for subsequent literary movements. For *Négritude*, *Realismo Mágico*, and *Créolité* would trace their theoretical roots to Price-Mars' arguments.

### 1.2.2. Négritude

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<sup>33</sup> David Nichols, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

<sup>34</sup> René Depestre, "Jean Price-Mars et le mythe de l'Orphée noir ou les aventures de la *négritude*." *L'Homme et la société* 7, 1968: 171-181. (my translation)

<sup>35</sup> James Arnold, *A History of literature in the Caribbean: Hispanic and Francophone regions*, 539. "The ideas of *noirisme* are kept alive in Haiti through the journal *Les Griots* (1938-40) and the racial theorizing about psychology and culture by Lormer Denis and François Duvalier. They kept Price-Mars's ideological legacy alive. The main purpose of the *griots* movement is described in their own words as "La valorisations du facteur raciologique" (the valuation of the raciological factor). Race was the point of departure for their pseudoscientific writings, whether the subject was the education system, history, sociology or literary criticism."

*Négritude* was also a reaction to the racist foundation of European colonialism that had placed those of African descent across the Global South in a position of inferiority. In its poetic version (for it had political, philosophical and ontological dimensions as well), it was a lyrical self-affirmation of black peoples and the revalorization of a mythical and collective African past. It traces its origins to the meeting of three black young students from the Global South in Paris: Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Gontran Damas from Guyana, and Leopold Sédar Senghor from Sénégal. This encounter was the catalyst for transforming a shared revolt vis-à-vis the conditions and fate of black men and women into a concept that would lend itself to criticize the legacies of colonial intervention across the globe.

Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) encapsulates the movement's insurrectional spirit when its poetic voice professes to accept and to cherish the black race's repulsive ugliness after an unexpected and salutary inner revolution: "par une innatendue et bienfaisante révolution intérieure, j'honore maintenant mes laideurs repoussantes"<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, *Négritude* appropriates the African attributes that Europeans had used to humiliate its former slaves and transforms them into sources of beauty and reasons for pride. It is important to note that under the pen of the *Négritude* writers, Africa is not just redeemed but idealized. Under the rhythm of the *tam tam* Africa and its symbols become a Dionysian power with the gift of renewing Western civilization.

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<sup>36</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939.

In turn, for Sartre the black poetry of *Négritude* embodies an orphic descent into hell, a quest to recover the lost vitality of the world, in a pilgrimage into wholeness.<sup>37</sup> As it will become very clear in the following two chapters, it is precisely this idea of the black race as vital resource for the world that becomes problematic for Maryse Condé and René Depestre.

The young Depestre first dared to voice his reservations in regards to *Négritude* in 1956 in a public debate recorded in *Présence Africaine* and later in a text entitled: *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude* (1980). For Depestre, the fixed duality of black Africa vs. white Europe fails to take into account the fertile in-between cultural reality such as that of creoles in Haiti. He also warns about the risk of bringing into being black fundamentalism (as it did under the Duvalier regimes in Haiti between 1957-1986). He singles out Lilyan Kesteloot and European specialists of *Négritude* as guilty of locking “le nègre dans sa noirceur et le blanc dans sa blancheur...” and creating a form of black Zionism.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Orphée Noir,” Introduction to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, 1948. “Cette inlassable descente du nègre en soi-même...c’est en s’abandonnant aux transes, en se roulant par terre comme un possédé en proie à soi-même, en chantant ses colères, ses regrets ou ses détestations...le poète noir atteint le plus sûrement à la grande poésie collective » or « il s’agit donc pour le noir de mourir à la culture blanche pour renaître à l’âme noire, comme le philosophe platonicien meurt à son corps pour renaître à la vérité. »

<sup>38</sup> René Depestre “Jean Price-Mars et le mythe de l’orphée noir ou les aventures de la négritude,” *L’homme et la Société* Vol. 7, 1968: 171-181. “Lilyan Kesteloot, comme d’autres spécialistes européens de la négritude enferment le nègre dans sa noirceur et le blanc dans sa blancheur...Pour Lilyan Kesteloot la négritude est irréductible. Elle est psychologie caractéristique due à une civilisation originale, élément auquel s’ajoutent les cicatrices de la Passion de la race, qui resteront sans doute imprimées longtemps dans la mémoire collective. Pour singulariser encore plus le nègre, Lilyan Kesteloot a soin d’annoncer au monde que l’Africain est spontanément peu sensible à l’esprit cartésien...Tous ces bavardages autour du concept de négritude définissent en fait un inacceptable sionisme noir.”

As for Condé, *Négritude* is also a vain and sentimental trap where the ideas of Africa, as an idyllic lost world, and of *le nègre*, as a repressed identity, obscure the true problems faced by those living in the Global South.<sup>39</sup> She questions the logic behind accepting an identity that does not exist, and chastises Césaire for inviting his people to accept what was created by Europe in a move that could become a mistaken understanding of identity. Notwithstanding, *Négritude* was an important stage for writers to recognize their own creative alienation and thus pave the way for subsequent generations of writers who would imagine stories beyond either their place in the periphery or the colonial metropolis, that is, beyond the native land and Paris.

### 1.2.3. Créolité

Equally obsessed with the idea of a return to the source, the writers of *Créolité* sought to circumscribe their creative work within the realities of their hybrid Caribbean culture, which they claim has yet to produce any literature. In the prologue of *Eloge de la créolité* (1989), the movement's manifesto, they declare:

“Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles. This will be for us an interior attitude- better, a vigilance, or even better, a sort of mental envelope in the middle of which our

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<sup>39</sup> Maryse Condé in “Négritude Césairienne, Négritude Senghorienne,” warns against Césaire’s invitation to celebrate the “nigger,” a label invented by colonial Europeans to subject other men and women to exploitation: “A quoi Césaire, tout au long du *Cahier* s’est-il invité et à travers lui, son peuple, sa race? A une totale acceptation de soi en tant que Nègre. Or le Nègre n’existe pas. L’Europe soucieuse de légitimer son exploitation le créa de toutes pièces, à partir de ce qu’elle croyait posséder comme de ce dont elle savait manquer. Si elle lui refusa l’intelligence, la raison et la beauté dont elle s’estimait dotée, elle lui donna la force brute (qui rapproche de la bête) et la démesure sexuelle. » (413)

world will be built...for a more fertile thought, for a more precise expression, for a truer art.”<sup>40</sup>

Their position of watchful vigilance and mental isolation in the process of constructing an “authentic” cultural identity translates a mistrust of articulations that would deviate from the prescribed definitions of *Créolité*. The use of the word “mental envelope,” which provides the image of an intellectual casing that would filter impurities from the pure and genuine culture of the West Indies, reveals the isolationist and exceptionalist tenor of their endeavor. Furthermore, the concept of *Créolité*, despite taking its inspiration from Edouard Glissant’s notion of *Créolization*, is defined as the *synthesis*—and not the *process* like it was for Glissant—of the complex and composite elements that make up identity in the French Caribbean.<sup>41</sup> Driven by the desire to offer a definition of their culture and claiming to want to repair the cultural alienation of the French West Indies, the manifesto and its proponents fall into the trap Glissant had foreseen and sought to avoid.

The *Créolité* writers declare their goal to be the healing of an identity crisis in West Indies by going beyond the cultural alienation of its writers. In their eyes,

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<sup>40</sup> Bernabé, Jean., Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant. *Eloge De La Créolité*. (Paris): Gallimard, 1993.

<sup>41</sup> Fred Reno, « Lecture critique des notions de domination et d’identité chez les écrivains-militants de la créolité », *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe* [En ligne], Spécial | 1997, mis en ligne le 01 avril 2011, consulté le 30 septembre 2016. URL : <http://plc.revues.org/781> ; DOI : 10.4000/plc.781

Reno quotes Glissant’s definition of *créolité* to highlight his distance vis-à-vis the *Créolistes*: « Ma différence avec la Créolité est que je crains qu’à définir une essence de la Créolité, on serve en exemple l’essence de ce que je suis, l’être créole... A la fin du discours antillais, dix ans avant que ne paraisse *Eloge de la créolité*, j’avais fait une note sur le mot créolité, en disant que pour moi, c’était une prétendue théorie de gens qui figent un processus et essaient d’en définir une essence... parce que pour moi, la créolisation est un processus où on se change soi même en changeant l’autre et en échangeant avec lui. »

writers before them either reproduced European aesthetic values, or, replaced these with others imported from Africa. They provide a long list of writers they chastise for what amounts to a mimetic expression of European models and whom they call zombies.<sup>42</sup> This is why they advocate an “interior vision” deeply anchored in the land, language, and traditions of the West Indies. It is only once writers have adopted this shielded position, anchored in the “authentic” culture of the region that a real resistance to coloniality would be possible.

It is important to highlight that, predictably, like many writers from the French Caribbean, the *Créolistes* felt the need to pay tribute to the tutelary ancestor Aimé Césaire, within whose lineage they locate their program. But this does not mean they embrace it without reservation. They are quick to point out *Négritude*’s limitations by calling it a paradoxical and violent therapy, since it ended the African amputation, but increased the identity crisis when it replaced Europe with Africa.<sup>43</sup> As we will see ahead, the *Créoliste*’s new prescriptive space for writing would be at odds with Maryse Condé’s commitment to creative freedom, and she was not alone. Others have objected to what she calls:

the emergence of a new order, even more restrictive than the existing one” where “(t)he tedious enumeration of the elements of popular culture which is made in the first pages of the manifesto leaves very little freedom for creativity. Are we condemned *ad vitam aeternam* to speak of vegetable markets, store tellers, “dorlis,” “koutem” ...? Are we

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<sup>42</sup> *Éloge*, 78. “From René Bonneville to Daniel Thaly, from Victor Duquesnay to Salavina, from Gilbert de Chambertrand to Jean Galmot, from Léon Belmont to André Thomarel, From Auguste Joyau to Paul Baudot, from Clément Richer to Raphaël Tardon, from Mayotte Capécia to Maire-Magdeleine Carbet...”

<sup>43</sup> Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant, *Éloge de la créolite*. 82. “A violent and paradoxical therapy, Negritude replaced the illusion of Europe by an African illusion.”



condemned to explore saturation the resources of our narrow islands? We live in a world where, already, frontiers have ceased to exist.<sup>44</sup>

As a Global South strategy that hopes to subvert the insidious presence of coloniality of power, *Eloge de la créolite* continues to marginalize West Indian culture and thus fails in its main objective. By limiting how texts are to be written, they restrict the imagination of their writers. By reinforcing the borders born from colonialism and failing to take into account diasporic subjects—like Rosélie in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* or Sancher in *Traversée de la mangrove*—they prolong their isolation and ignore the new contours of the world.

#### 1.2.4 Realismo Mágico

Even if *Realismo Mágico* is an overused, all-encompassing and thus meaningless label invented by foreign editorial houses and critics to describe, contain, and market the wave of commercially successful writing that was produced in Latin America, it is fair to say that it dramatically changed the international literary landscape.<sup>45</sup> As noted by Mexican novelist and critic Jorge Volpi, *Realismo Mágico* converted Latin American literature into an obligatory referent in Western culture.<sup>46</sup> Whether it is an exclusive phenomenon of the Americas, as Alejo

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<sup>44</sup> Condé, Maryse. "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer." *Yale French Studies* 2000: 151. *JSTOR Journals*. Web. 2 Dec. 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Realismo magico and its critical and commercial success has been the target of all sorts of accusations, debates, and disagreements. Critics disagree on its origins, definition, politics and geographical scope. For a survey of these debates see Lois Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Jorge Volpi. "El Fin De La Narrativa Latinoamericana". *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 30.59 (2004): 33–42.

Carpentier theorizes it in the prologue of *El Reino de este Mundo* (1949) under the rubric of “Lo Real Maravilloso Americano”, or a Latin American version of European fantastic writing à la Kafka that features a new level of artistic maturity and sophistication, as Angel Flores explains it in the article that launches the discussion of *Realismo Mágico*, the writers associated with the movement carried out an epistemic rupture similar to the one accomplished by Price-Mars in Haiti.<sup>47</sup>

For Angel Flores, the novel in Spanish America had been eclipsed by poetry and non-fiction due to the low quality of its novels. By contributing to and embracing the European tradition of the fantastic, the new Hispano-American writers had finally managed to break free from what he calls “the inept,” “uncertain” and “imitative” “mawkish sentimentalism that pervades so many of the Latin American classics.”<sup>48</sup> He describes their new literary strategy as the “transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal... where time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality.”<sup>49</sup> This view does not consider magical realism as an aesthetic form exclusive to the Americas or a product of the American reality.

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<sup>47</sup> For Alejo Carpentier Haiti is central to his understanding of “*Lo Real Maravilloso*”, where he locates his creative epiphany. He explains this in the prologue of *El Reino de este Mundo* (1949) when he writes: , “Esto se me hizo particularmente evidente durante mi permanencia en Haití, al hallarme en contacto cotidiano con algo que podríamos llamar lo *real maravilloso*. Pisaba yo una tierra donde millares de hombres ansiosos de libertad creyeron en los poderes licantrópicos de Mackandal, a punto de que esa fe colectiva produjera un milagro el día de su ejecución”

<sup>48</sup> Angel Flores, “Magical Realism in Spanish America” in Zamora, Lois Parkinson., and Wendy B Faris. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Others would disagree entirely with a view of Magical Realism as tracing its originality to Europe and would rather anchor the birth of the movement in the American continent. For Luis Leal—and more importantly for Alejo Carpentier—Magical Realism is “an attitude towards reality” born from the political and historical events of the region. They do not see it as a magical escapist form of writing, but rather as a position that tries to seize and work out the contradictions that exist in Latin America.<sup>50</sup>

Carpentier’s claim to the originality of the events in the history of the Americas makes *Lo Real Maravilloso* a marker of difference, an authentic form of expression that has finally been able to translate its strangeness. When he writes:

Today, we know the names of these things, the forms of these things, the texture of these things; we know where our internal and external enemies are. We have forged a new language appropriate to the expression of our reality, and the events that await us will find that we, the novelists of Latin America, are the witnesses, historians, and interpreters of our great Latin American reality.<sup>51</sup>

Carpentier is not only claiming the right of Latin American writers to become active agents (“witnesses”) in the elaboration of their own identity and producers of a different kind of knowledge (“historians” and “interpreters”), but he is also rejecting European representations of the Americas and its inhabitants. And in this gesture of creative independence, he echoes *Indigénisme*’s call for a return to the local beliefs and customs, as well as *Négritude*’s revalorization of Africa and *Créoliste*’s

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<sup>50</sup> Luis Leal, “Magical realism in Spanish America” in Zamora, Lois Parkinson., and Wendy B Faris. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>51</sup> Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” in Zamora, Lois Parkinson., and Wendy B Faris. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995, 107-108.

preoccupation with an authentic expression for its writers. These new creative imperatives hope to grant these regions of the Global South a separate cultural identity from that of Europe, and consequently are giving voice to a “decolonial” poetics. But it is precisely such an obsessive insistence on being unique and different from the rest of the world that motivates the critics of magical realism to categorize the movement as producing a renewed form of exoticism for European and North American consumption. *Realismo Magico’s* inclusion of indigenous legends and local myths, alongside descriptions of political and social realities, makes this form of writing vulnerable to the objection that it represents a return to the nostalgic primitivism of the early chronicles of the New World.

Such is the criticism of the members of McOndo, the literary movement that forms in reaction to magical realism, when they satirize their predecessors in the introduction of their 1996 anthology of short stories by comparing the movement’s literary works to the false objects of wonder previously produced by Europeans to impress the inhabitants of the Americas:

When in 1492 Christopher Columbus disembarked in American soil he was received with great excitement and veneration by the islanders, who believed him to be a celestial messenger. After having celebrated the rites of possession in the name of God and of the Spanish crown, he proceeded to ingratiate himself with the indigenous inhabitants by distributing colored glass for their pleasure and astonishment. Nearly five hundred years later, the descendants of those remote Americans decided to pay back the kindness of the Admiral and distributed to the international [reading] public other bits of colored glass for their pleasure and enjoyment: magical realism.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Fuguet, Alberto, and Sergio Gomez. Introduction. *McOndo*. Ed. Fuguet and Gomez. Barcelona: Mondadori, 1996.

Fuguet and Gomez's comments suggest that for all their intentions to proclaim a separate identity from Europe in the hope to remedy their alienation and cultural dependency, writers of *Realismo Mágico*, as well as *Indigénisme*, *Négritude*, and *Créolité* remain caught in a reactive position against colonialism, and thus inextricably subordinate to the old continent and isolated from the world at large. Paradoxically, this very gesture of creative independence reinforced, if not confirmed, the exotic *Otherness* they were seeking to overcome in their writing.

Overcoming this conflict energizes Depestre, Condé and Gamboa's creative efforts as all three authors insist on the idea that the real emancipation for the writer, considering his limited political clout, consists on liberating his writing from the minority label and expanding the national creative arena. In other words, only after dislodging the imagination from the folkloric essentialism that haunts Global South writing would they be able to participate in the World of Literature on an equal footing.

### 1.3 Globalization

*In art there are no foreigners, in reality national attachment is one of the most burdensome attachments felt by writers; indeed the more dominated the country, the more constraining it is.*

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*

Just like the concept of the Global South emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc to describe what was formerly known as the developing "Third World", discourses on globalization proliferated on the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in an effort to explain and understand the new political and cultural organization of

the world. No longer divided between the East and the West, a vision of a unified planet resurfaced as if the years 1492, 1791 and 1945 had not already marked pivotal moments that changed the ways we imagine and experience the world.<sup>53</sup> As a consequence of this proliferation, the term globalization, and its treatment in literary studies, has been mired in ideological controversies at the same time that disagreements abound on its very definition.<sup>54</sup> For Zygmunt Bauman globalization's opacity is related to its overuse since it

is on everybody's lips; a fad word fast turning into a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a pass-key meant to unlock the gates to all present and future mysteries... All vague words share a similar fate: the more experiences they pretend to make transparent, the more they themselves become opaque.<sup>55</sup>

Despite this opacity, however, there has been a pressing need to conceptualize the existence of an imagined, shared, and global social space. The technologically mediated interconnectedness of the planet hardly can be questioned in light of the

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*. London: Verso, 2004. Denning chronicles how and why scholars disagree on the beginning of Globalization: 1492 for those who point to the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas (Dussel, Mignolo), 1791 for those who see in the Haitian Revolution a decisive moment that challenges the foundations of Europe's modernity (C.L.R. James), and 1945 for those, including Denning, for whom "the discourse on globalization is largely a reflection on the legacies of the period which now seems to have lasted from 1945 to 1989, a period dominated by a particular imagination of the globe, in the image of three worlds," 26.

<sup>54</sup> Brennan, Timothy, "From Development to Globalization: Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory," *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 1. Timothy Brennan summarizes five main positions vis-à-vis globalization. Political promise in the Kantian enlightenment program, that is, as transcending nationalisms, ethnic rivalries; 2. Development of trade and finance: pure freedom of exchange of positive forces of capitalism that trumps political structures – this can be good or bad; 3. Resulting from a combination of technology and American ideology, or the unfolding of planetary capitalism – this can be good (Thomas Friedman) or bad (Paul Krugman); 4. It is neo-colonialism with the added technological and cultural monopoly of the United States imposing its ways across the planet (the positions Brennan endorses); 5. Globalization does not exist.

<sup>55</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1998.

hypnotizing grasp and momentum of the Internet, as well as the accelerating speed at which information is exchanged between very distant places across the globe. As early as 1964, Marshall McLuhan described the unification of the planet, anticipating the World Wide Web: “Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a *global embrace*, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned,” he explained.<sup>56</sup> For Shani Orgad this embrace leading to the erasure of borders happens first in what she calls the “Global Imagination” where:

(t)he world emerges as a common space that we inhabit and traverse, a space where we engage and exist with other agents. It is a place of commonality and sameness, a global village, a “flat space”, where geographical cultural, political, economic and religious distinctions are increasingly less delineated.<sup>57</sup>

Even if these concepts have been only theorized as of recent in the field of social science as “something new”, writers, literary critics and philologists have been describing this heterogeneous unity in the sphere of literature and the arts well before other disciplines sought to trace its contours.

### 1.3.1 World Literature

The notion of a shared space that has allowed writers from every corner of the world to converse, agree, contradict, influence, and reshape each other’s creative productions has long existed despite the ongoing debates on globalization’s novelty, inclusiveness, and politics. Writers have never produced in a vacuum, but have

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<sup>56</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964. (*my emphasis*)

<sup>57</sup> Orgad, Shani. *Media Representation and the Global Imagination*, 254.

instead entered into a dialogue with a Tradition that extends well beyond their own national, linguistic and geographical borders.<sup>58</sup> Goethe's term *Weltliteratur*, according to David Damrosch, "crystallized both a literary perspective and a new cultural awareness, a sense of an arising of a global modernity."<sup>59</sup> Erich Auerbach would expand on Goethe's vision and define *Weltliteratur* in terms of its relationship to history, where humanity emerges as the "fruitful intercourse between its members"<sup>60</sup>. For Edward Said, Auerbach's visionary concept, which traces its roots to the German philological tradition, already includes a concern for preserving the diversity and particularities of individual traditions that make up World Literature, as he explains in the introduction to his translation of Auerbach's well-known 1952 essay.<sup>61</sup>

Notwithstanding, this global and unified image of literature is partially eclipsed during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For it is critical to remember that literature has been studied and understood, largely and for the most part, exclusively in terms of a national political context. The parallel birth of the modern nation-state and the disciplines that study literary productions have contributed to the conception that cultural artifacts are deeply anchored in and related to the history of the nation-state. And yet as Pascale Casanova notes national literatures

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<sup>58</sup> Shills, Andrew, *Tradition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981, 148. "The writing of literary works is nonetheless dependent on anterior texts and on all the social apparatus required to place an aspiring creator of a new literary work in contact with the works which are the points of departure from which he builds his own."

<sup>59</sup> Damrosch, David. *World Literature in Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Auerbach, Erich, Maire Said, and Edward Said. "Philology and 'Weltliteratur.'" *The Centennial Review* 13.1, 1969: 1–17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 1 "*Weltliteratur* is not to be understood as a selective collection of world classics or great books-although Goethe seemed often to be implying this-but rather as the concert among all the literature produced by man about man."



are not the emanation of an independent national genius, a national determined identity, but rather are constructed in an international arena of rivalries.<sup>62</sup> National literatures rely on the—often denied—international political battles that made a certain form of mythology necessary.

Benedict Anderson outlines this process of co-dependence between the formation of the nation-state and the rise of national literatures in the now canonical theorization of the rise of a national consciousness. For Anderson the coming together of print technology and capitalism creates the ideal climate and conditions for a new form of consciousness to arise:

the convergence of capitalism and print technology... created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.<sup>63</sup>

The consequences of the technological possibility to fix language *en masse* at a time when people could not understand each other's variations of English, French and Spanish are enormous. They give rise to a common discourse, existing in "national-print-language", in which to imagine the community of the "nation-state" around a common language. The study of literature follows this momentous change in consciousness where the nation-state and its literature sign a pact with each other.

This conceptualization of a fragmented World of Literatures according to nationality and language has had its challengers. In recent years this idea has been disputed not just by appealing to the centrality of Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* in

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<sup>62</sup> Pascale Casanova, *La République Mondiale des Lettres*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 2006. 46.

the midst of an increase obsession with globalization, but also by those motivated by the wish to highlight the inequalities that continue to shape the “One and Unequal”—in Franco Moretti’s formulation—world of literature.<sup>64</sup> Despite Moretti’s controversial call for “Distant Reading”—the title of his 2013 book where he dismisses qualitative interpretation of texts in benefit for quantitative analysis—the vision behind his program is legitimate. When he expresses a concern vis-à-vis the unmanageable number of literary productions across the globe and the difficulty, or worse, impossibility of their inclusion into the ever-growing canon in a planetary system of letters, he has a valid point.<sup>65</sup> For he is right in pointing out the discriminatory nature of the canon, where the “great unread” remain excluded from study and circulation.<sup>66</sup> This is why it is not surprising that his vision of a unified system of letters has been taken up by others (albeit his controversial project of applying scientific means to solve a humanistic problem), notably by Pascale

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<sup>64</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature” *New Left Review*.

<sup>65</sup> Franco, Moretti. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013. For Moretti distant reading becomes a condition for knowledge in a world of literature that ignores “the great unread,” those texts that never make it into the canon. He borrows economic metaphors from Marx and World-System school of economic history to claim that “forms are the abstracts of social relationships” and calls for “a study of symbolic hegemony across the world”. He leads the Stanford Literary Lab where his team applies network technology to texts and analyses literature via software. Written pages thus become data sets, which he hopes to transform into recognizable patterns. He turns to technology in order to remedy his anguish and need for synthesis in face of the large quantity of literary works available.

<sup>66</sup> Moretti borrows from Margaret Cohen the catchy idea of “the great unread,” to designate all those books that fail to enter the canon. Cohen was referring to the great female authors, pioneers of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, who remain unknown as the realist novel took over from sentimentality. See Cohen, Margaret, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Casanova, for whom the bordered understanding of literature continues to veil the workings of what she describes as an autonomous Republic of Letters.<sup>67</sup>

Pascale Casanova also challenges the fragmentary vision of literature, according to language and nationality, and proposes a different perspective. She describes literature as a parallel, invisible, and relatively independent territory, not ruled by national affiliations or linguistic borders, which organizes the way recognition is accorded to writers and their work. For Casanova this “world literary space” is the product of a historical process that connects literature and the world in a succession of collisions, struggles and tensions in the fight for recognition not completely unconnected to Europe’s colonial engagement. She describes the expansion of the “World Republic of Letters” as starting in 16<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe, mainly Germany and France, to gradually include other parts of the world through a series of struggles that enlarged its scope. Casanova is quick to point out that this unification of the World of Letters is far from complete and describes the ways in which France remains in a privileged position at the center—as an arbiter of literary value and taste—despite the space’s independence from national paradigms.<sup>68</sup>

Depestre, Condé and Gamboa aspire to enter this parallel and independent universe of literature, this *Republic of Letters*. A space they hope to conquer by dislocating their narratives from the national borders that have enclosed and

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<sup>67</sup> Casanova, Pascale, *The World Republic of Letters*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 146, “the fact remains that the greatest English authors enjoyed truly universal recognition during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries only through the translation of their writings into French.”

imprisoned their writing and imagination within the familiar territory of the French West Indies and Latin America. For these spaces prolong a coloniality of power, an inferiority vis-à-vis the West. As argued by Casanova, as long writers submit to a national particularism they will not earn the literary capital that would ensure their entrance and acceptance to this post-national space:

Si les premiers intellectuels nationaux se réfèreraient à une idée politique du littéraire afin de constituer un particularisme national, les nouveaux venus vont se référer aux lois littéraires internationales et autonomes pour faire exister nationalement un autre type de littérature et de capital littéraire.<sup>69</sup>

Death, as the dissertation argues, is the means Depestre, Condé and Gamboa break away with a constrictive national particularism. Depestre frees the figure of the zombie from the role of passive Haitian victim and transforms him into a universal paragon of the Creole. Maryse Condé's treatment of mourning dislocates the collective myth of a French West Indian culture and identity, and frees her writing to explore individual paths of lucidity and freedom. Santiago Gamboa's engagement with the noir detective novel, *novela negra*, releases his imagination from having to recreate a confining national space and deepens his rupture with forms of representation that prolong a particular and exceptional view of Colombia.

This renewed turn towards a global idea of literature and culture, one not conforming to the ideology of the nation-state that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is contributing to uncover the exclusionary quality of these conceptions of literature. This is a point of view stressed by Walter Mignolo, for whom the national model of literature is a legacy of coloniality that emphasizes

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<sup>69</sup> Casanova, *La République Mondiale des Lettres*.

colonial origins and perpetuates rigid dual thinking. For Mignolo “the notion of homogeneous national cultures and the consensual transmission of historical and literary traditions, as well as of unadulterated ethnic communities, are in the process of profound revisions and redefinitions” as a factor of the large migratory movements taking place at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>70</sup> Although he cautions that globalization is not a new phenomenon (he places its beginnings in the long sixteenth century), he notes that the volume and direction are dramatically different from those seen before. Whereas during the 19<sup>th</sup> century it flowed towards the south and east and originated in the north and the west, that is, it flowed from the Global North to the Global South, this movement takes the opposite orientation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This radical shift launches the issue of having to think about the status of diasporic subjects, exiles, and migrants at the heart of Europe and the United States. A new reality forces critics to question the rigidity of linguistic and national literary frames of reference to understand culture, and gestures at the same time to the limitations of how knowledge has been constructed in the past. In other words, the modes of understanding that have shaped the current production of knowledge in the university, namely the linguistic and the national, become inadequate to address current issues and reveal their fault lines. In addition, Mignolo also points out the many ways in which understanding literature on the basis of national affiliation echoes colonial designs and thus remains complicit with European imperial ambitions. He is eager to show how these divisions are far from being objective

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<sup>70</sup> Mignolo, Walter, *Coloniality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 236.

designations since they perpetuate a form of knowledge complicit with historical biases:

I have been arguing that the strong link between language, literature, culture and territory construed as neuter configuration in the nineteenth century are being constantly uncoupled by social transformations as well as cultural practices... Maintaining the links between language, literature, culture and territory implies reproducing imperial allocations of cultural configurations, and in the case of "Latin America," remaining locked and attached to a form of identification that coincides with the organization imposed by the imperial world order.<sup>71</sup>

Insisting on the idea that language has been an instrument for a discourse of national ideology that denied access to many who did not fit into the "imagined" homogenous community—namely blacks, Indians, mestizos— the 19th century nation building processes extended new forms of colonial order as they reconfigured power dynamics to the benefit of Europe, and constituted incomplete emancipations from coloniality.

Many were not included in these homogenous definitions of the nation. In fact, national discourses of "mestizaje" in places like Cuba, for example, elaborated an idea of national homogenous identity by erasing internal ethnic diversity.<sup>72</sup> All those left in the margins, unaccounted, unrepresented become more visible as globalization forces increase their numbers and make them the norm as opposed to the exception. The Global South, as the emancipatory project described at the beginning of this chapter, requires a different kind of thinking, or to return to

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<sup>71</sup> Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories Global Designs*, 235.

<sup>72</sup> Luis Duno-Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2003.

Khatibi's formulation: *une pensée autre* beyond the national and linguistic grids of conceptualization.

Finally, globalization, with its constant movement across national and linguistic borders, has revalorized positions that have existed and flourished along the margins. Theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa who straddle two or more cultures and have proposed a theoretical poetics of the fertility of the border, become vital points of reference in grasping not only the limitations of national frames of understanding but provide the vocabulary and conceptual strategies to think through the questions raised by globalization. As Anzaldúa has detailed, "mestizos", those who live in the borderland, in between two or more worlds, have long experienced the ambivalence, clash of voices and perplexity of globalization.<sup>73</sup> Having experienced the inefficacy of the national frame of reference to translate their reality, they become models for articulating another way of being in the world. While the national has been exhausted,

the work of mestizo consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem...lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our cultures, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Gloria, Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. Fourth edition, 25th anniversary. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012. "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness"

<sup>74</sup> Anzaldúa, 80.

The mestizo consciousness described by Anzaldua is nothing more than a prelude to the experience of globalization where the borders that had maintained a sense of security, meaning and order fail to contain experience. Death, as the ultimate frontier and the eternal human unknown, translates the challenge of living in a new reality—where former anchors are dissolving— as well as the possibility of articulating novel forms of being. Depestre, Condé, and Gamboa exploit the ambiguity of this boundary and elevate its possibilities.

#### **1.4. Dislocation**

Dislocation in the context of the Global South has been used to describe three distinct but interrelated circumstances. First, the psychological alienation urgently described by Frantz Fanon in *Peau Noires Masques Blancs* (1952) that marks the experience of men and women born into situations of colonization.<sup>75</sup> The general feeling of living outside of the present, in the margins, as exceptions to a History anchored in a white, European reality. Second, the condition of displacement of migrants: those who participate in the large 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century migrations from the Global South to the Global North in the hope to improve their quality of life. In the majority of cases, their relocation is motivated by a desire to avoid the economic and political hardships present in their native countries, conditions directly connected—side effects— to the coloniality of power described by Anibal Quijano. Third, a general sense of the loss of place and rootedness due to the breakdown of

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<sup>75</sup> Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skins, White Masks* “Because it (colonialism) is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?”



national borders in an imagination that is becoming more and more global, and as the boundaries that had maintained durable and stable forms of identity lose their standing. This is a condition theorized as liquid modernity by Zigmunt Bauman where a decentering of the world leaves people without any anchors to pursue truth, value, and meaning.<sup>76</sup> Although these three forms of dislocation do inform, in different degrees, Depestre, Condé and Gamboa's writing, it is not the dislocation they propose through their writing of death.

Narratives of death in the postcolonial milieu have often been viewed in terms of their denunciation of colonialism, their desire to return to an imagined and mythical common past, their reparative impulse to reconstruct the world. Critics have underscored their connection to collective memory, political engagement and literary theorization. They have pointed to the renewal and revitalization of francophone texts, the category where these narratives exist, and their effect on the arid French (hexagonal France) literary landscape. In *Pour une littérature monde*, Michel Lebris along with the other forty-three signatories, celebrate what Lebris calls a historical moment: five of the seven literary prizes of the fall are being discerned to four francophone writers.

And yet narratives of death are perhaps most interesting for their fundamental preoccupation with the immediately quotidian, with the sensible

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<sup>76</sup> Zigmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. Bauman is extremely critical and pessimistic for what he sees is the deterioration of values and stability in today's consumer society. He denounces the way consumer culture requires the rapid and incessant change of ideas, and thus has trivialized the notion of revolution while enthroning the concept of change as an ideal.

dimension of the present, and for their commitment to describe the emergence of a new global consciousness that does not abide by national, linguistic, or religious demarcations. Rewriting Haitian zombies for René Depestre, exploring the space of mourning for Maryse Condé and investigating the underworld of violent crime for Santiago Gamboa appears as the perfect conduit to critique the old border paradigm (by revealing its obsolescence), to highlight the porous nature of the world (its flows), and to describe the emerging configurations of power in the Global South while elaborating a sharp critique of the renewed avatars of domination. Emerging from what would previously be considered three separate yet not too distant traditions, their works describe a Global South consciousness of interconnectedness and allow a chronological mapping of its development. Death constitutes a rhetorical strategy for three very different writers to describe a rupture, their own dislocation from the idea of the Global South.

The present work contrasts three different strategies that make use of the topos of death as an aesthetic solution for changing direction and confronting a stagnant discourse on identity. Depestre, Condé and Gamboa bring to their treatment of death the particularities of their history, landscape and language in three unique ways but with similar goals: refusing essentialisms, asserting the instability of identity and emphasizing the creative power of encounter. I have chosen writers encompassing three separate generations (Depestre was born in 1926, Condé in 1937 and Gamboa in 1965) in order to show a progression in literary consciousness and better highlight the shift from narratives inspired by a history of colonialism to one where a constant flow of people and ideas takes center

stage. It invites a moving away from a definition of being as “selfhood”, with all the identity politics that discourse carries, and towards an understanding of being “in situation” in the Sartrian sense, where the local and the particular take center stage.

## Chapter 2

### The Third Space of Death: Depestrian Zombies and Creolization

The essential feature [...] is that (they) are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories... Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense a source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.

Victor Turner, *Betwixt and Between*

Zombies occupy an important position in the Haitian imagination. They are embedded in the national narrative as symbols of the complex history and political experience of the only successful slave revolt and first Black Republic in the world. The zombie conveys the contradictions of possessing a glorious revolutionary past, on the one hand, and yet enduring a long succession of political failures, on the other. They have provided Haitian writers with the means to explain why and how the men and women, who were able to free themselves from French colonial rule in 1804 and abolish slavery from their land, have also failed to create viable political institutions. Before traveling into the global imagination as Hollywood monsters, zombies existed in the syncretic religion of Vodou as mutable figures embodying life and death, personifying submission and rebellion, and inspiring fear and hope among its followers. At the crossroads of history, religion, and art, the zombie has fed a local need for meaning in a sea of political upheaval as well as a global fascination with its paradoxical ontology. Today, zombies are a transnational

cultural phenomenon that spilled beyond the story of colonization and slavery in Haiti. In addition to mythologizing the tribulations of a nation that was not recognized by the international community for decades after its birth, the figure of the zombie has become a fecund metaphor for articulating the loss of personhood in a capitalist system that eliminates thinking and reproduces consumption-driven automatons.<sup>77</sup> While many definitions of the zombie do trace its origins to Vodou and Haiti, very few acknowledge the other side of the zombie, that is, its positive qualities.<sup>78</sup> In fact, most depictions of the zombie found in popular culture reflect a lobotomized figure that lacks agency, a metaphor for those condemned to a life of slavery, and a critique of systems. These representations fail to take into account the heroic elements briefly mentioned above, aspects that would motivate René Depestre to unearth the zombie from the Vodou pantheon.

The zombie plays an important role in Rene Depestre's writing, but takes a considerable distance from most representations found in Haitian literature across the twentieth century. This ambiguous character not only appears frequently across Depestre's poetry, novels and essays, manifesting a particular obsession for the writer, but is invested with extraordinary vision, superhuman strength and, at least

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<sup>77</sup> France agreed to recognize Haiti's independence in 1825 only after President Boyer accepted the terms of reparations imposed by France where French planters would be paid 150 million gold francs in reparations for the loss of property in Saint-Domingue. The United States would wait until 1862 to recognize Haiti, a year after the outset of the U.S. Civil War.

<sup>78</sup> Arthur Cotterrel, *A Dictionary of World Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. "The 'zombi' is defined as "a soulless body. In the Voodoo cult of Haiti, a zombi is the slave of a magician. The soul may have been removed by magic from a living person, or the body of someone recently deceased may have been brought up out of the grave after the soul had been separated from it by regular rites of death. As the lord of the dead, Ghede has the power to animate corpses as zombis."

in his fictional world, with the capacity to heal the crimes of history. When Depestre sets to describe the zombie, we are presented with a heroic figure that does not fit the traditional role of the mute, powerless victim. Cap'tain Zombi, Henri Postel, and Hadriana are endowed with their own voices and they are fierce. In the first person singular, they summon the strength of the Loas of Vodou, the intermediaries between the human and divine worlds, to transform the malefic violence around them through a recuperative ritual. A close reading of Cap'tain Zombi in *Un arc-en-Ciel pour l'Occident Chrétien* (1967), Henri Postel in *Le Mat de Cocagne* (1979), and Hadriana in *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* (1988) brings to light how Depestre's revalorization of the zombie dislocates the traditional discourse of victimhood that has been the hallmark of the Global South. These characters allow Depestre to go beyond a series of false dichotomies in terms of race, nationality and Haiti's relationship with the rest of the world. By rewriting zombies Depestre releases his native land out of a myth of passivity imposed from the outside, and thus, in a sense, launches the nation into the maelstrom of the *Tout-monde*.

After mapping the different ways the zombie has been predominantly a figure of degradation in Haitian literature, where it serves as a symbol of the problems of the nation, this chapter will look at the archetype of the *pharmakos*. René Girard's theorization of the redeemer proves very useful in apprehending the possibilities articulated by René Depestre's zombies and explains why he resurrects these ambiguous characters to liberate his writing from a reactive, postcolonial discourse. The double connotation of the redeemer, as both pitiful and venerable figure, echoes the position of the Creole. They both embrace their impurity as a

condition for bringing about freedom and the betterment of their community. Their most grievous defect—their lack of purity—also represents the promise for a transformation ushering a more inclusive consciousness. It will become clear that Depestre subverts this figure from the margins of death by transforming it into a hero and, in this way, brings to the fore the possibility of a different narrative for Haiti. From someone lacking agency and incarnating silence, submission, absence of mind and ineptitude, the figure of the zombie becomes the epitome of freedom. He is endowed with empathy, vision and beauty, while becoming the depository of collective memory. Zombies, in their ambiguous ontology, broaden the narrative possibilities for Depestre to subvert and to rewrite history and thus offer the possibility of a *pensée-autre* in the Global South.

## 2.1 Figures of Degradation

The concept of the zombie is inextricably interwoven with the process of creolization in the West Indies. The figure first appears in Haitian letters through the eyes of a French colonist, Moreau de Saint-Méry, who in offering a portrait of the fears, psychology and belief systems of the slaves in eighteenth century Saint-Domingue, provides the following definition of the zombie: “Mot créol qui signifie: esprit, revenant”<sup>79</sup> [Creole word that means spirit, revenant.] Despite the cursory

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<sup>79</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue : avec des observations générales sur sa population, sur le caractère & les mœurs de ses divers habitants, sur son climat, sa culture, ses productions, son administration, &c. &c. : accompagnées des détails les plus propres à faire connaître l'état de cette colonie à l'époque du 18 Octobre 1789 : et d'une nouvelle carte de la totalité de l'isle*. Paris : A Philadelphie, 1797-1798.

definition of a figure ambiguously connected to death and the afterlife in the imagination of the slaves, his explanation conveys the syncretic quality of the concept. It is thought that as the plantation system in the Americas forced the confluence of several West and Central African cultural and religious practices, the notion of the zombie may have emerged from an African figure that portrays both the existence of a god-spirit who bestows life on humans, and conversely, the punishment for those not abiding by his divine rules. Kevin Alexander Boon traces the etymology of the zombie to the lower Congo River where

Nzambi was a term denoting the “sovereign Master”, the deity that placed man on Earth and takes him away at the moment of death. Men were expected to live under the *nkondo mi Nzami*, or God’s prohibitions. To violate these laws was a sin against Nzambi... for which Nzambi might impose *lufwa lumbi*, the “bad death.”<sup>80</sup>

In the concept of the zombie converges a cluster of ideas about the godhead, his divine prohibition, and the punishment for infringing upon it. Moreover, it may have provided a supernatural explanation for the deplorable fate of the slaves in a plantation system where they found themselves robbed of their freedom in a strange land and stripped of their most basic humanity. As a creolized cultural object in Saint-Domingue, the zombie, much like the Vodou religion, transformed an amalgam of fragments from African traditions to meet the spiritual and social needs of the slaves under French and Christian oppressive colonial rule.

Edouard Glissant and Antonio Benitez-Toro have theorized the ways in which the confluence of traditions from Africa and Europe in American soil gave rise

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<sup>80</sup> Kevin Alexander Boon, “Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture,” *Monsters And The Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott. New York: Rodopi, 2007, 36.



to an unstable and endless creolization whose only constant is change. Creolization does not constitute a predicable synthesis that could be interpreted in essentialist terms, but rather a discontinuous series of occurrences. For Benitez-Toro creolization “is a term with which we attempt to explain the unstable states that a Caribbean cultural object presents over time,” and which translates the unpredictability generated by the shocks of encounter between the cultures that came together in the plantation.<sup>81</sup> He adds that creolization can be understood as an explosion that

threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions - fragments of diverse kinds that, in their endless voyage, come together in an instant to form a dance step, a linguistic trope, the line of a poem, and afterwards they repel each other to re-form and pull apart once more...<sup>82</sup>

This would explain why, as a discontinuous recurrence, the figure of the zombie has never stayed the same across time, and, persists in reforming and pulling apart, as will become clear from our close reading ahead.

This malleable potential of the zombie, or its undecidability as Jacques Derrida would have it, also contributed to the elaboration of a complex narrative of emancipation, which lived in the Haitian imagination during the slave’s quest for freedom in Saint-Domingue. Edouard Glissant proposes a similar poetic vision for this process and insists on the idea that creolization remains an open specificity that

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<sup>81</sup> Antonio Benitez-Toro, “Three Words Towards Creolization,” *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity*. Ed. Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998, 55.

<sup>82</sup> Antonio Benitez-Toro, 55.

scatters unpredictably across time and space. He is careful to differentiate creolization from *métissage* and explains that

if we assume that *métissage* is generally the result of an encounter and a synthesis between two different components, it seems to us that creolization is a *métissage* without limits, the elements of which are manifold, its outcome unpredictable. Creolization diffracts whereas some forms of *metissage* may concentrate once more...<sup>83</sup>

This understanding of the process of creolization guides Depestre's configuration of the figure of the zombie, and we will return to it in more detail ahead because it allows the writer to propose a different vision of Haiti.

### 2.1.1 Historical Ambiguity

Before the zombie became a figure of degradation in twentieth century Haitian literature, it existed as a powerful and bloodthirsty avenger divinity of the Petro tradition within the Vodou religion. During the last efforts of the Saint-Domingue revolution, the zombie enters the Vodou pantheon, under the name of Jean Zombi. Joan Dayan reports that historians Alain Madiou, Milo Rigaud, and Henock Trouillot wrote about a slave by the name of Jean, a real man whose viciousness towards the white French colonists became legend. His role as rebel ancestor in the fight for independence was celebrated and led to his enthronization as a Loa.<sup>84</sup> In her study of Haiti's history and religion, where she looks at the place

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<sup>83</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

<sup>84</sup> Milo Rigaud, *La Tradition Vodou*. Paris: Editions Niclaus, 1953. 67. "Jean Zombi est un des prototypes les plus curieux de la Tradition voodoo. Il fut un de ceux qui, d'ordre de Dessalines, massacrèrent le plus de blancs pendant la libération d'Haïti du joug français. Jean Zombi es actuellement un des mystères les plus influents du panthéon voudoesque : comme *loa*, il appartient au rite Pétro. »

of ritual in the construction of the nation's mythology, Joan Dayan explains that the zombie is a depository of its history:

The dispossession accomplished by slavery became the model of possession in Vodou: for making a man not into a thing but into a spirit. In 1804, during Dessalines' massacre of the whites, Jean Zombi, a mulatto of Port-au-Prince, earned a reputation for brutality. Known to be one of the fiercest slaughterers, Madiou describes him as a man with "vile face," "red hair," and "wild eyes." He would leave his house, wild with fury, stop a white, then strip him naked. In Madiou's words, he "then led him to the steps of the government palace and thrust a dagger in his chest. This gesture horrified all the spectators, including Dessalines."<sup>85</sup>

The zombie in this case embodies the creative negotiations that took place in the imagination of those living in Saint-Domingue as several cultures from Africa and Europe met and were made to coexist alongside each other.

Furthermore, as Michel Laguerre has aptly argued, religion and politics in Haiti have sustained a close relationship, and this connection has shaped both the history and the imagination of the community.<sup>86</sup> From the memorialized Bois-Caiman ceremony in 1791 to the rediscovery of Vodou by writers of *Indigénisme* in the 1920's and the Caco Rebellion during the American occupation, Vodou has served as a form of resistance, concealment and adaptation to the oppressive forces from abroad. The survival of the individual and the community has been tied to the tools provided by this creolized belief system.

Jean Zombi—the first literary representation of the zombie within Haiti— is born out of the need for a violent revolt against the Napoleonic forces that, launching a second fierce campaign under the command of Rochambeau, had to be

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<sup>85</sup> Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 36.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

stopped in order to secure the founding of the new nation. Emerging as a ruthless man/spirit who was prepared to massacre indiscriminately any planters along his path, Jean Zombi serves strategically to dissuade the French from pursuing further resistance against the slave insurgent forces. Not surprisingly then, although he does not elaborate at length on the role of the zombie in the Vodou pantheon, historian Milo Rigaud lists Jean Zombi alongside the mythical heroes Boukman, Macakandal, Christophe, Dessalines, André Rigaud, Romaine-la-prophétesse and Toussaint Louverture.<sup>87</sup> It would seem as if the violence and brutality the zombie personifies in the historically based Jean Zombi was imperative for the emancipation of the slaves and the establishment of Haiti.

The conceptual evolution from Moreau de Saint-Mery's account of the zombie as a spirit or revenant into the sanguinary Jean Zombi is remarkable. These imaginatively accommodations, in response to the political needs of a nascent republic, foreshadow the mutations taken by the zombie in René Depestre's writing. Unfortunately, the adaptability of the zombie will be forgotten in most literary representations throughout the twentieth century, when writers will focus almost exclusively on the alienation experienced under the nearly thirty year dictatorship of the Duvaliers.<sup>88</sup> As it will be seen in what follows, this pivotal figure of the Haitian imagination becomes the main vehicle for criticizing Haitian society. Jacques-

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<sup>87</sup> Milo Rigaud, *La Tradition Voodoo Et Le Voodoo Haïtien: Son Temple, Ses Mystères, Sa Magie*. Paris: Niclaus, 1953.

<sup>88</sup> The Duvalier dynasty controlled Haiti for nearly thirty years of dictatorship. Francois Duvalier was elected president of Haiti in 1957 and stayed in power until his death in 1971. His son Jean-Claude replaced him as "Président à vie" [President-for-life] until 1986 when he was forced into exile. He fled to France onboard a U.S. aircraft with the collaboration of the CIA under President Reagan.

Stephen Alexis, Anthony Phelps, Gerard Etienne, and Frankétienne mobilize the zombie as a powerful symbol of what is wrong with Haiti and its social institutions.

Despite its heroic past as a figure of rebellion against colonial oppression, the zombie becomes a figure of degradation, a metaphor symbolizing the subjugation of Haitians in most of twentieth century national literature. For Kaiama Glover zombification is a “situational phenomenon that has served metaphorically to illustrate the various forms of institutionalized oppression suffered by the Haitian population throughout its colonial and postcolonial history.”<sup>89</sup> This attitude vis-à-vis the zombie is described in the work of Alfred Métraux, whose scholarship has become the dominant discourse on Vodou. For the Swiss anthropologist, the zombie constitutes an archetype of the slave. In his 1959 seminal work on Vodou, Métraux defines the zombie as someone who is caught in between life and death, and who has been robbed of his consciousness:

He moves, eats, hears what is said, even speaks, but has no memory and no knowledge of his condition. The *zombie* is a beast of burden that his master exploits without mercy, making him work in the fields, weighing him down with labour, whipping him freely and feeding him on meager, tasteless food.<sup>90</sup>

Whereas he is much alive and in possession of his five senses, the zombie is dead in terms of his intellect, and thus lacks human agency. Unfortunately, the positive aspect and rebellious potential of this figure, as it existed in Jean Zombi of the Petro tradition, completely disappears in his ethnographic account of Haitian beliefs. Notwithstanding, Métraux does acknowledge that Vodou constitutes a form of

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<sup>89</sup> Kaiama Glover, *Haiti Unbound*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*. New York : Schocken Books, 1972, 242.

resistance to institutional oppression and that Haitian belief in supernatural spirits represents an empowering act from the viewpoint of the oppressed. He insists on the fact that “for the slave the cult of spirits, and of magic too, amounted to an escape; more it was an aspect of the resistance which he sustained against his oppressive lot.”<sup>91</sup> But this political dimension of the religious inventiveness of Haitians does not include the figure of the zombie. And yet, Métraux is not alone. The zombie is transfixed by a long list of writers, both inside and outside of Haiti, as a figure of dread to be exploited in order to condemn the political and social realities of the island.<sup>92</sup> Jacques-Stephen Alexis, Gérard Etienne, Anthony Phelps, and Frankétienne, having recourse to the negative view of the zombie we just provided, offer a background against which Depestre erects his positive view of the zombie.

### **2.1.2 The Zombie in Twentieth-Century Haitian Literature**

The zombie is a vehicle for denouncing the psychological alienation of the Haitian bourgeois elite in Jacques-Stephen-Alexis 1960’s short story “Chronique d’un faux-amour”. In the first person singular, Alexis assembles the sorrows of a young mulatto woman from the Haitian elite who, zombified and made prisoner by the groom’s stepfather on the day of her wedding, finds herself in France, ten years later, in a convent after her captor’s death. Her zombification is her punishment for repudiating Haiti’s African heritage, personified in her future husband’s humble

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<sup>91</sup> Métraux, 30.

<sup>92</sup> Kaiama Glover in “Exploiting the Undead; the Usefulness of the Zombie Figure in Haitian Literature” points out how “the less frequently acknowledged side of the zombie’s dialectical nature—its transformative, even revolutionary capacity—” has not been exhaustively explored by critics and proves a “quite productive point of entry into a number of Haitian literary works.”

origins, in particular the stepfather, a man she looks down on and describes in the most contemptuous terms:

... un ours brun mal léché à ce qu'on dit, toujours vêtu de gros bleu, de sandales de cuir brut et qui ne sait même pas s'exprimer en Français... nègre grimaud, gorille à la peau de brique et au sourire ambigu... avec des yeux mouvants et rouges qui dansent, telles de grosses mouches qui s'agiteraient devant ses orbites, cupules de chair flasque et ridée...<sup>93</sup>

[an uncouth fellow according to what people say, always dressed in navy blue, with rough leather sandals and incapable of expressing himself in French... pale nigger, gorilla with brick skin and ambiguous smile... with fast and dancing red eyes, like large flies rustling in front of its orbits, flabby and wrinkled skin]

For it is not only he who gives her the poisoned bridal bouquet that causes her to faint in the church, but also who becomes her master until his death, when she finds herself relegated to a zombie. This is explained by the fact that the man she so despised was a powerful hougan, or Vodou priest. Her repudiation of what he represents embodies the elite's disdain towards a part of the Haitian culture, the African element that a whole generation of Indigenist writers idealized as the "real Haiti." The short story is reminiscent of Gérard de Nerval's *Aurelia* to the extent that Alexis uses madness as a narrative strategy to bring together two contradictory realities and show the disjuncture at the heart of the main character.<sup>94</sup> In this case it is not between dream and real life, like it is the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century French romantic novel, but between Haitian Vodou culture and French civilization. In other words, between the perceptions of Haiti held by the mulatto bourgeois elite, on the

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<sup>93</sup> Jacques-Stephen Alexis, "Chronique d'un amour fou," *Romancero aux étoiles*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, 140.

<sup>94</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française "Le Livre de Poche", 1999.

one hand, and those embraced by the black peasantry “incapable of expressing (itself) in French”, on the other. In intermittent sequences oscillating between past and present, dream and reality, and madness and reason, the reader enters the zombie’s diary to learn how the young woman waits in vain. The young woman symbolizes Haiti waiting to be rescued by an outside force, while refusing to acknowledge either her present status as a nun in France, or her past as a zombie in Haiti. Alexis opens the short story with the zombie’s description of her unfortunate condition in a “colorless hinterland” in between two regions, obviously refereeing to Haiti and France, where she “vegetates” suspended between life and death:

Voilà dix ans que j’attends ma première nuit d’amour, la nuit qui me réveillera et m’amènera au jour, la nuit qui m’arrachera à l’hinterland équivoque, incolore où je végète, où ma tête pourrit entre deux contrées. A gauche, le Royaume des Vivants où chevauche le Prince d’Aurore, l’Amour aux bouches de rubis, à droite l’Empire des Morts où galope le Baron Noir...<sup>95</sup>

[For ten years I have been waiting for my first night of love; the night that will wake me up and bring me back to daylight, the night that will pull me away from the ambiguous, colorless hinterland where I languish, where my mind rots in between two regions. On the left, the Kingdom of the Living where the Prince of the Dawn rides, Love with rubies lips, to the left the Kingdom of the Dead where the black Baron gallops...]

Her highly complex tale allows Alexis to describe a fractured society in which the bourgeois elite’s disdainful view of the peasantry engenders a general state of alienation, that is, the narrator’s metaphorical zombie condition before the wedding, and a particular form of madness, her literal insanity after being rescued.

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<sup>95</sup> Alexis, 104.



Whereas Alexis launches a scathing criticism of the social stratification at the heart of the Haitian elite via the zombie and concludes, rather pessimistically, that the inner fracture of the country leaves the island in a hopeless and reclusive state of madness, we will see that René Depestre borrows from Alexis short story to offer an optimistic view of the Haitian composite society. *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* can be read as a rewriting of Alexis' short story, where the zombie, instead of symbolizing stagnation embodies the hope of creolization. For Depestre, the in-between condition of the zombie has the potential for translating the richness of Haiti's hybrid culture and providing an example in a globalized world, where national borders and racial definitions have ceased to provide meaning.

While the parallels between the two stories are numerous, the message is radically different. Even if Alexis and Depestre's zombies in "Chronique d'un faux amour" and *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* symbolize Haiti and translate their creator's views of the future of the country, their perspectives are diametrically opposed to each other. Vodou remains primarily a source of beauty and healing for Depestre, while Alexis is more cautious towards idealizing a cultural element that could be mobilized for political control. In addition to critiquing the alienation of the nation's elite, "Chronique" articulates Alexis's warning against religious forms of escapism through the voice of the zombie. The writer is denouncing the atrocities of Duvalier's négritude politics, where the popular religion of Haiti became part of his ideological manipulation of the masses. Alexis is spelling out the dangers of attempting to contain the vastness of human experience into tired altarpieces,

exhausted hieratic and dehumanized formulas under Duvalier's perversion of Vodou:

Nous qui '*entrées en religion*', avons cru pouvoir disparaître les oubliettes de l'Imaginaire, n'arrivons plus à couler notre comédie humaine dans ces retables fatigués, ces formules épuisées, hiératiques et déshumanisées.<sup>96</sup>

[We who '*entered into religious life*', had believed we were able to make disappear the forgotten depths of the Imagination, but can no longer cram our human comedy into these tired altarpieces, exhausted, hieratic and dehumanized formulas.]

And it is this blistering appraisal of the future of Haiti under Duvalier that brings into the foreground new configurations of the zombie as a symbol of degradation. An entire generation of writers will exploit the zombie in order to make palpable for readers how the violence and oppression of the regime have brought about individual madness and collective loss of meaning.

Madness is the central theme of the novel *Les Affres d'un défi* (1979), written the same year as Depestre's *Le Mât de cocagne*. While it is true that the zombie in Frankétienne's work is liberated and brought back to life to become an agent of further emancipation for the colony of zombies in the village of Bois Neuf, his rebirth is only possible through the intercession of another. Furthermore, his freedom brings about unbridled violence, a premonitory account of the madness that would to be experienced seven years later in Haiti during *dechoukaj*.<sup>97</sup> With yet

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<sup>96</sup> Alexis, 129-130.

<sup>97</sup> "Dechoukaj" is a Haitian Creole word for uprooting and it refers to the violent period that followed Duvalier's departure from power. In 1986, many Haitians struck back in vengeance against the *houngans* (Vodou priests) who were suspected to have collaborated with Duvalier. It is interesting how Frankétienne's account is

another Haitian writer, the zombie remains a figure of unconsciousness, alienation and terror.

Frankétienne makes use of the zombie as the basis for his lamentation on the universal struggle between alienation and self-realization.<sup>98</sup> This is why we cannot speak of a rehabilitation of the figure of the zombie in the case of Clodonis, who, once awakened by the loving Sultana, is possessed by a thirst of vengeance and destruction that does not spare even his liberator:

Reconstituant, en fragments épars, les souffrances vécues comme dans un long cauchemar sous les griffes de Saintil et de Zofer, Clodonis se déchaine en beuglant, tel un taureau enragé. D'une puissance foudroyante, il applique une gifle à Sultana qui chavire et s'évanouit...<sup>99</sup>

[Piecing together, through scattered fragments, the suffering endured as in a long nightmare under the claws of Saintil and Zofer, Clodonis unleashes his fury, bellowing like an enraged bull. With deadly strength, he slaps Sultana who falls over and faints. ]

The violence described in Frankétienne's text is characteristic of what is known as the *bois nouveau*, the zombie who upon regaining consciousness behaves as if possessed by the weight of the crimes committed against him.<sup>100</sup> Even when the zombie ceases to be an alienated and unconscious creature, it remains a figure of dread for the writer. His liberation unleashes violent madness and is not a source

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premonitory, if not prophetic, of the violence that was to erupt after Duvalier's departure.

<sup>98</sup> Kaiama Glover, "Exploiting the Undead; the Usefulness of the Zombie Figure in Haitian Literature", *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Fall 2005, 114.

<sup>99</sup> Frankétienne, *Les Affres d'un défi*, 199.

<sup>100</sup> *Bois nouveau* is the name given to the zombie who, after consuming salt, comes back to life.

for hope. His awakening ushers yet another cycle of violence, probably equally as brutal as the one the zombie just escaped.

la raison s'égare et les pulsions ténébreuses émergent, l'instant même où tout devient possible: la barbarie, le viol...les représailles, le pillage, la destruction aveugle, la pagaille...<sup>101</sup>

[reason loses its way and dark urges emerge, the moment when everything becomes possible: barbarism, rape...retaliation, pillage, blind destruction, mayhem.... ]

Again, even if the emancipation of Clodonis's recalls, in its successful violence, the insurgent qualities discussed earlier about Jean Zombi (the Loa who joined the Vodou pantheon after the Saint Domingue's revolution), he remains a reactive force of terror. For throughout the novel, the descriptions of the zombie provided by Frankétienne can be summed up by their textual imprisonment, a feature that he playfully manipulates and clearly brings to the foreground in the following passage:

Fantômes muselés, nasillant au-dessous du silence, les zombis ont le visage défiguré, des yeux vitreux, des paupières en accent circonflexe, un nez en apostrophe, des oreilles envirguées, des lèvres entre guillemets.<sup>102</sup>

[Muzzled ghosts, twanging under the silence, the zombies have a disfigured face, glazed eyes, circumflexed eyelids, apostrophed nose, comma-traced ears, lips in quotations.]

Alienated through their textual existence, that is, through a long history of representations that describe them as the submissive and silent living-dead, it would seem that their only recourse for liberation consists of reacting through indiscriminate violence. In effect, all depictions of the zombie in *Affres d'un défi* echo the definition provided in the glossary at the end of the novel, reiterating those

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<sup>101</sup> Frankétienne, 203.

<sup>102</sup> Frankétienne, 117.

inaugurated by Métraux in his ethnographic work *Voodoo in Haiti* (1958), and continuing those by Alexis in “Chronique d’un faux amour” (1960), Phelps in *Moins l’Infini* (1973) and Gerard Etienne in *Le Nègre Crucifié* (1974).

Mort vivant, asservi et utilisé comme main d’œuvre gratuite. C’est un être apathique qui végète dans une zone brumeuse entre la vie et la mort. Il se meut, mange, entend, parle, travaille pour son maître ; mais il n’a aucun souvenir et il n’est nullement conscient de son état. On reconnaît un zombi à son air absent, à ses yeux vitreux et à l’intonation nasale de sa voix. La docilité du zombi est absolue à la condition qu’on ne lui donne pas de sel. S’il goûte d’un plat contenant ne serait-ce qu’un grain de sel, le brouillard qui enveloppe son cerveau se dissipe d’un coup. Le brusque réveil de sa conscience le transforme aussitôt en un nouvel être plein d’énergie et de détermination. Récupérant son passé, gonflé de colère, emporté par un incoercible besoin de vengeance, il devient ce qu’on appelle un « bois-nouveau ».<sup>103</sup>

[Living dead, enslaved and used as free labor. An apathetic being that vegetates in a shadowy zone between life and death. He moves, eats, listens, speaks, works for his master; but he does not have any memories nor is conscious of his condition. One recognizes a zombie for his absent look, his glassy gaze and the nasal intonation of his voice. The docility of a zombie is absolute unless he is given salt. If he tastes a dish with even a grain of salt, the fog that surrounds his brain suddenly dissipates. The abrupt awakening of his consciousness immediately transforms him into a new being, filled with energy and determination. Recovering his past, bloated with anger, overtaken by an incoercible need for vengeance, he becomes what we call a “bois nouveau”.]

It is against this image and definition of the zombie that Depestre erects his own, and contradicts the literary representations of this Haitian figure so often exploited by his contemporaries.

In fact, madness is the central theme of Anthony Phelps *Moins l’infini*.

Published in 1973, the novel describes the terrible fate of a group of committed

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<sup>103</sup> Frankétienne, 219-220.

Haitian intellectuals after their unsuccessful attempt to stop the Duvalier regime. The story is weaved through a kaleidoscopic array of voices that brings to life the hopeless atmosphere in the country and describes the psychosis of Marco, one of its members. After Paula, Marco's lover and collaborator is captured, tortured, and killed, the group dissolves and most of its members are forced into exile. Except for Marco. He remains locked in the house that used to host their meetings and where he progressively loses his mind. Haunted by the memories of Paula and filled with nostalgia for the departed members, Marco gradually transforms into a zombie.<sup>104</sup> Secluded in a prison of his own making, he refuses to leave the house and hallucinates of death rituals performed by Duvalier himself. In these visions, not completely detached from the brutality that really took place in the streets of Port-au-Prince, Phelps paints a portrait of the dictator extolling his accomplishments vis-à-vis the subjugation of his people. Duvalier is portrayed as addressing "Gran-Oncle Trou," a parodied character that represents the United States, and vaunting his ability to do in less than ten years what the U.S. marine invasion of Haiti was not able to achieve in over fifteen years:

Vois ce que j'ai fait de ce peuple! ... En moins de dix ans, je l'ai complètement zombifié. J'ai accompli ce que tu n'as pas pu réaliser en quinze ans d'occupation : je leur ai arraché du cœur jusqu'aux noms

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<sup>104</sup> Anthony Phelps, *Moins l'Infini*, 182. Père Emile, a character in the novel likens Marco and his entire generation to zombies: "Mais comme c'est étrange, ils se ressemblent tous cet après-midi. Et tous ont les traits de Marco. Leurs yeux sont sans feu, sans sel, sans âme. De vrais regards de zombis, de demeurés. [But it is so strange; they all look alike this afternoon. And they all have Marco's traits. Their eyes have lost their fire, their salt, their soul. A true gaze of the zombie, of the half-witted.]

des Pères de la patrie. Dessalines-Pétion-Louverture-Christophe, ce ne sont que des mots sans significations...<sup>105</sup>

[See what I have done with these people! ... In less than ten years, I have zombified them all. I was able to carry out what you could not do in fifteen years of occupation: I have eradicated from their hearts even the names of the Fathers of the nation. Dessalines-Pétion-Louverture-Christophe are nothing but empty words...]

Converted into zombies, Haitians have not only forgotten how to fight back, but have also lost all memory of their glorious past. It is remarkable how the zombie for this generation of writers continues to be a referent for loss, disillusionment, madness and disenfranchisement. And this is precisely why we find Depestre's portrayal of the zombie remarkable in that it transforms a figure of degradation into one of beauty. Contrary to what had become a tradition among his contemporaries, Depestre celebrates the zombie as someone who never relinquishes his will to fight, like Henri Postel in *Le Mat de cocagne*, and who galvanizes into action Haiti's exceptional revolutionary history like Cap'tain Zombi in *Un Arc-en-Ciel pour l'Occident chrétien*. By unearthing the revolutionary but forgotten aspects of this figure, Depestre reappropriates the negative label attached to Haitians and transforms it into a positive one.

## 2.2 From Victim to Heroic Model

*C'est par l'imaginaire que nous gagnerons à fond sur ces déréllections qui nous frappent, tout autant qu'il nous aide déjà, dérivant nos sensibilités, à les combattre.*

*Edouard Glissant, Traité du Tout-Monde*

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<sup>105</sup> Phelps, 202.

In a national imagination where the zombie has been a fitting vehicle for writers to describe the political and social degradation of Haitians, René Depestre makes an effort to spell out his distance from his predecessor's position. Separating himself from the literal ethnographic accounts of zombies, the writer proposes to consider and refashion the zombie from the perspective of the literary imagination. Gaston Bachelard and Samuel Taylor Coleridge have argued for a differentiation of what is traditionally understood by "imagination," a distinction that becomes essential for our purposes of understanding what Depestre has set to do with the figure of the zombie. For Bachelard, the function of *l'imaginaire* —which is not the same as the imagination and does not have an equivalent in English— is to liberate, change, and open human experience to new realms of possibility. As such, *l'imaginaire's* role is not to form images but rather to deform, transform and open perception in order to allow the arrival of the new:

On veut toujours que l'imagination soit la faculté de *former* des images. Or elle est plutôt la faculté de déformer les images fournies par la perception, elle est surtout la faculté de nous libérer des images premières, de *changer* les images... Le vocable fondamental qui correspond à l'imagination, ce n'est pas *image*, c'est *imaginaire*. Grâce à *l'imaginaire*, l'imagination est essentiellement *ouverte, évasive*. Elle est dans le psychisme humain l'expérience même de *l'ouverture*, l'expérience même de la *nouveauté*.<sup>106</sup>

[We always think of the imagination as the faculty that *forms* images. On the contrary, it *deforms* what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them... The basic world in the lexicon of the imagination is not *image*, but *imaginary*. The value of an image is measured by the extent of its *imaginary* aura. Thanks to the imaginary, *imagination* is essentially

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<sup>106</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'Air et les songes*. Paris : Librairie José Corti, 1943, 5-6.



*open and elusive.* It is the human psyche's experience of *openness* and *novelty*.<sup>107</sup>

This distinction between “imagination” and “imaginaire” brought to the foreground by Bachelard also appears in Coleridge’s differentiation between “fancy,” as the passive and mechanical human ability to reproduce images from memory, and “imagination,” as the vital, transformative, and creative function of the mind whose function is to convey a new sense.<sup>108</sup>

Depestre’s treatment of the zombie appeals to Coleridge’s imagination and Bachelard’s *imaginaire* for their dynamism, for their ability to transform reality and create brand new ways of seeing. The artist, who has been made aware of his own limitations in the political sphere, sets to change the downtrodden image of the zombie, and by extension that of Haiti’s, through a complete refashioning of the zombie in his creative writing.<sup>109</sup> While he remains mindful of the many ways this figure has been mobilized to condemn Haitians into lifeless passivity and theorize

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<sup>107</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*. Translated by Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell. Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988.

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

<sup>109</sup> René Depestre belongs to a generation of Haitian writers who actively participated in politics following the example set by Jacques Roumain. At nineteen years old, Depestre was a founding member of *La Ruche* (The Beehive) a group that allied political revolts with aesthetic preoccupations. Their journal expressed an absolute rejection of the repressive policies of President Élie Lescot (1941-1946) and invited Haitians to join in their Marxist revolution. Their success in forcing Lescot out of power caught the attention of André Breton and other French surrealist who saw in them the promise of their own programs, but also contributed to Depestre’s life-long exile from the island. The writer, welcomed by the French Surrealists into their ranks, aligns himself with the Soviet and Cuban Revolutions only to be disappointed when he witnesses how collective ideology trumps over individual freedom.

the political stagnation of the country, he explains that his *poetic* treatment of the zombie will transform it via the imagination.

Dans chaque ouvrage consacré au vaudou, on avait obligatoirement un chapitre touchant la zomberie en Haïti. On y voyait son auteur courir à bout de souffle après un insaisissable fantôme. A une certaine époque, le flux des travaux sur cet aspect de la sorcellerie haïtienne vint à constituer une industrie, universitaire ou non, fort prospère qui allait du sensationnel le plus échevelé à la recherche académique la plus savante. Je voulais, à égale distance du feuilleton et de la monographie, déposer un témoignage personnel à la fois neuf et argumenté, passionné et ramassé, avec l'espoir, en hommage à ma bien-aimée, d'élever le débat de son plus haut niveau.<sup>110</sup>

[Every work devoted to Vodou included an obligatory chapter on Haitian zombies. One saw authors running after an elusive ghost. For some time, the flood of works about this aspect of Haitian sorcery constituted a thriving industry, academic or not, that ran from the most disheveled sensationalism to the most sophisticated monograph. I wanted, equally distanced from both the chronicle and the monograph, to contribute with an original and well-argued, passionate and concise personal account, in the hope of raising the debate to its highest degree in honor of my beloved.]

In effect, we are to understand that to elevate the question of the zombie to its *highest degree*, for the poet, is to bring into play the dynamic power of the imagination. That is, if zombies are included in his writing, it is because they will be treated through a personal aesthetic that seeks to find an inventive or imaginative way to bypass their former representations and thus change the debate that surrounds Haiti and its inhabitants. This exploration will not be based in the jargon of sociological or mythological theories of decolonization, but in terms of a celebration of beauty, in other words, through poetic means.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> René Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988. 134-135.

<sup>111</sup> Depestre, *Hadriana*, 143. "Laisse tomber la mise en forme de ces propositions faussement férues de mythologie et de sociologie de la décolonisation. Pour la

### 2.2.1 Pharmakos

To single out the zombie as a paragon of beauty and venerate his image almost in sacred terms would seem like a paradoxical choice on the part of Depestre, but is in fact a powerful strategy. If the writer unearths the most pathetic, contemptible, and shameful character to be found in twentieth century Haitian literature from the margins of death, it is because the zombie embodies, like no other, the archetype of the redeemer. Only such a figure would, on the one hand, contain the contradictions that plague the reality of Haiti in which Depestre's writing is securely anchored, and on the other hand, have the potential for transforming it. René Girard's theory of the *pharmakos* makes intelligible the double connotation present in the zombie as well as his latent power for change:

d'une part, on voit en lui un personnage lamentable, méprisable et même coupable; il est en butte à toutes sortes de moqueries, d'insultes et bien sur de violences; on l'entoure, d'autre part, d'une vénération quasi religieuse; il joue le rôle principale dans une espèce de culte. Cette dualité reflète la métamorphose dont la victime rituelle, à la suite de la victime originaire, devrait être l'instrument ; elle doit attirer sur elle toute la violence maléfique pour la transformer, par sa mort, en violence bénéfique, en paix et en fécondité.<sup>112</sup>

[on the one hand, he is considered a pathetic, contemptible and even shameful character; he faces all sorts of mockery, insults and, of course, violence; and yet he is revered in almost religious terms; he is at the heart of a sort of cult. This duality reflects his instrumentality, as a ritualized victim, in the metamorphosis following the example of

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deuxième fois en une vie, Hadriana Siloé frappe à ta porte en pleine nuit. Lève-toi et ramène l'être aimé à la maison de son enfance." [Drop the configuration of those falsely obsessive propositions filled with the mythology and sociology of decolonization. For the second time in your life, Hadriana Siloe knocks at your door in the middle of the night. Get up and bring your loved one to the home of her childhood.]

<sup>112</sup> René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*. Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1972. 144.

the original victim; the victim must draw unto himself all the malefic violence to transform it, through his death, into beneficial violence, into peace and fertility.]

As we will see, Cap'tain Zombi, Henri Postel, and Hadriana, each in a different way, contain the duality described by Girard.

This dual nature is precisely what allows them to become agents of a ritualized transformation. Drawing unto themselves the horror that has plagued Haiti, they bear a collective burden in order to transmute it, and thus become the object of veneration. Cap'tain Zombi carries the imprint of a long list of crimes against humanity, those perpetrated in the name of racial difference across the entire planet, and converts them into his sacrificial offering. The zombie's song of agony here is a requirement for summoning the arrival of a new humanism, as it is described in the last section of *Un Arc-en ciel* entitled "Pour un nouvel age du coeur humain" [For a New Age of the Human Heart].

In similar fashion, Henri Postel embodies a set of contradictions. He personifies foolishness and wisdom, at the same time that he functions as a victim and a victor in Depestre's 1979 satirical account of Haiti under the Duvalier regime. The zombie's sacrifice in this novel constitutes an act of defiance that carries out a general awakening of those around him. His willing immolation in *Le Mat de Cocagne* releases the collective imagination from the vicious grip of the dictatorship's terror tactics.

As for Hadriana, her zombification is a rewriting of Jacques-Stephen Alexis' version in "Chronique d'un faux-amour." While for Alexis zombification represents

a punishment for the cultural alienation of the elite who prefers French civilization to African derived beliefs, Hadriana liberates the nation from an unnecessary contradiction, and personifies Depestre's defense of creolization. Hadriana the zombie is a creolized Haiti. On the surface she appears as a French white beauty, victim of dark Vodou forces, but after her zombification she emerges as a powerful, black Creole goddess. Her zombification, as was noted by Joan Dayan, constitutes a "conversion ritual, a recuperative fantasy" that restores both the French and African aspects of Haiti.<sup>113</sup> If the zombie carries within her the crime of "bovarysme" so criticized by Price-Mars and the writers of *Indigénisme* it is only to rework the acknowledgement of French culture within Haitian life as a rich ingredient of its composite nature. Haiti is thus transformed, via the zombie, from being an isolated, alienated outcast, barely surviving in the periphery of the world, into an icon of the *Tout-Monde*. Her source of shame, that is her hybridity, becomes a vehicle for the writer to position Haiti as a precursor of the world of the future, a world of creolization.

### 2.2.2 Zombie as Loa Divinity

The ritualized transformation of the zombie in Depestre's writing appears for the first time in the character of Cap'tain Zombi, one of the many Loas summoned in *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chrétien*. The narrative poem, published in 1967 at the height of the Cold War, stages a Vodou bath, or ceremonial cleansing, aimed at

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<sup>113</sup> Joan Dayan, "France Reads Haiti: René Depestre's Hadriana dans tous mes rêves." *Yale French Studies*, No. 83, Postcolonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, and Nomadisms, Volume 2, 1993. pp. 154-175.

purifying all the crimes committed in the name of western Christian civilization.<sup>114</sup>

To be clear, the purpose of the bath is to bring about a planetary humanism by transmuting the bigotry and bellicosity at the heart of a white family in Alabama.

This family personifies the sins of the West, which will be plunged into a ceremonial drama of healing. The poem describes the dynamic unfolding of Depestre's mystical and spiritual possession as he invokes the entire Vodou pantheon to help him overturn a racist discourse which has created the "monsters of Birmingham" and the "monsters de Pretoria," and is heading towards nuclear war. These visions of death and destruction are coupled with those reflecting the horrors of slavery and colonization, which afford the poem an elegiac tone. The poet is set on transforming a worldview, which if left unchecked, would propel the planet towards self-annihilation. As a matter of fact, the image of the atomic bomb created by the United States, and the imminent threat of nuclear destruction, permeates the entire poem. It is within this context that the zombie functions as a visionary and healer in the crusade to end human suffering. The ritual is intended to call forth the agrarian gods of Vodou, or as Depestre calls them "mes dieux végétaux," [My green gods], "les dieux de mon village natal" [the gods of my native village] to prevail over "les grands dieux de l'âge nucléaire/Les fabricants de soleils homicides"[The great gods of the nuclear age/The creators of homicidal suns].<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 310. Métraux explains that Vodou baths "do not only counteract illness; (but) their virtue extends to a wider field. The 'charm bath' over which Damballah-wèdo presides...has the power of 'curing' illnesses regarded as incurable, reconciling inveterate enemies, procuring work and securing promotion."

<sup>115</sup> Arc-en-ciel, 228.

In the poet's understanding of the world, Western men and women have perverted the Christian myth and have used it to sanctify the brutal violence of racism. Whether in the segregationist policies in the south of the United States or in the bloody struggle to preserve apartheid in South Africa, the Christian West and its ideology are guilty of spiritual hypocrisy. To render a clear portrait of the West's false virtue, Depestre makes use of a series of images, set side by side, which convey the contradictions of the principles upheld by "a good American family" and how they betray a larger hypocrisy:

Une famille bien américaine...	[A properly American family...
À la fois Jésus et le Ku-Klux-Klan	Jesus and Ku Klux Klan together
La Bombe H et la Chaise Electrique	H bomb and Electric Chair
Et la statue de la Liberté!	And the statue of Liberty!] <sup>116</sup>

The surprising pairs of Jesus and the Ku-Klux-Klan, and the statue of liberty and the utmost symbols for the disregard towards human life (the atomic bomb and the electric chair) constitute powerful images in the poem. They reveal the cleavage between a veneer of righteousness and a reality of hostility that exists in the Western mind. Furthermore, they provide a concrete example of why the poet's incensed voice proclaims: "Le monde verra ce que vous avez fait/De l'homme qui pleurait sous les oliviers!"[The world will see what you have done /With the man who was crying under the olive trees!]

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<sup>116</sup>René Depestre, "Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident Chrétien" in *A Rainbow for the Christian West*, translated by Joan Dayan. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977. 114-115.

Depestre appeals to the redemptive fury of his gods as antidote to the sickness lodged in the hearts and minds of the corrupt Alabama family. Their divine procession is intended to lead them into confession and atonement for their sins. Indeed, one after one, the wife, sons, and daughters of the white Alabama judge are transformed into Vodou initiates and plunged into the transformative bath prepared by the Loas. For each and every one of them represents an offense that needs to be recognized and purged.<sup>117</sup> Their purification will open the way into a new and improved form of knowledge:

Je change soudain vos vieilles perversités sudistes en une grande baignoire que je remplis d'eau de mer... Cette eau combattra vos hystéries, vos manies, vos trahisons, vos verroteries morales, vos blanches superstitions...Et chacun des loas présents va verser dans votre bain du nouveau jour la goutte de rosée de sa sagesse haïtienne !

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[I suddenly change your old southern perversities into a large bathtub that I fill with water from the sea... This water will fight your hysterias, your manias, your treasons, your small-trinket morals, your white superstitions... Each of the loas present will pour the dewdrop of his Haitian wisdom into your new bath!]

It is within this larger ritual of healing that Depestre locates the zombie, where he serves as a wise and powerful god of the Vodou tradition. We will now turn our

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<sup>117</sup> Depestre, *Arc-en-ciel*, 118-119. "J'Habille de rouge vif vos autres filles ! Ce sont mes bossales! Et vous Juge d'Alabama je fais de votre orgueil mon bagui! Je trace mon vèvé au beau milieu de votre salon...Et vos cinq fils sont les cinq cierges de mes libations ! Et votre noble épouse est e zin où je fais flamber de l'huile en hommage aux dieux de mon village natal ! [I dress your daughters bright red! They are my initiates! And you Alabama judge I turn your pride into my altar-room! I draw my vèvé in the very middle of your parlour...And your five sons are the five tapers of my libations! And your exalted wife is the zin in which I set oil on fire in homage to the gods of my native village!]

<sup>118</sup> René Depestre, "Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident Chrétien" in *A Rainbow for the Christian West*. translated by Joan Dayan. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977. 162-163.



attention at how the poet describes Cap'tain Zombi as a Haitian divinity, then refashions him into the depositary of black collective memory, and finally crowns him as a creolized archetype of the redeemer of the *Tout-Monde*. As we will see, this geographical broadening of the zombie's identity from Haiti, into the black Atlantic, and the *Tout-Monde* reveals Depestre's larger strategy of uprooting Haiti from the confines of the strictly national frame of reference and transforming the creolized nation into a model for the rest of the world.

It is essential to keep in mind that the avatar of the zombie, as it appears in *Un Arc-en-ciel*, is first and foremost a Haitian Vodou deity. Cap'tain Zombi comes into view alongside fifteen other Loas as they prepare the cleansing waters for their sacred drama.<sup>119</sup> Depestre breathes new life into Jean Zombi, the violent and rebellious character that entered the Vodou pantheon during the Haitian revolution, and who was described by historians, but ignored by most twentieth century writers. As a manifestation of the divine and under a different name, Cap'tain Zombi is endowed with superhuman perception. Not only are his senses heightened, but

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<sup>119</sup> These Loas are: Atibon-Legba (the god of the crossroads), Ogou-Ferraille (the god of fire and might), Damballah-Wèdo (the great rainbow serpent), Agoué-Taroyo (the Loa of the seas), Ogou-Badagris (the master of lightning and storm), Guédé-Nibo (the spirit of death who is associated with Jesus), Azaka-Médé (the god of agriculture), Cousin Zaka (patron saint of farmers), Agassou (the god of the sweet waters), Baron-Samedi (god of death), Chango (god of fire), Ti-Jean Sandor, Agaou (god of storms), Baron-La-Croix, and Loko (god who holds the key between life and death) (All references to the symbolism of the Loas included in "Epiphanies des dieux du vaudou" are taken from the notes included in Joan Dayan's translation). See René Depestre, "Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident Chrétien" in *A Rainbow for the Christian West*. Translated by Joan Dayan. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977.

they also display a high degree of synesthesia reminiscent of both Baudelaire's "Correspondances" and Rimbaud's "Voyelles".

Je bois par les oreilles	[I drink through my ears
J'entends avec les six doigts	I listen with ten fingers
J'ai une langue qui voit tout	I have a tongue that sees all
Un odorat radar qui capte	A radar-smell that picks up
Les ondes du Cœur humain	The waves of the human heart
Et un toucher qui perçoit	And a touch that sees smells
A distance les odeurs.	From a distance] <sup>120</sup>

Much like it was the case for the nineteenth century French romantic poets, synesthesia opens the doors of perception and grants access to a deeper form of gnosis. This knowledge of spiritual mysteries allows the zombie to travel into the past and across the line that separates life and death. The zombie's sixth sense gives him the ability to communicate with the dead and, in so doing, becomes their voice:

Quant à mon sixième sens	As for my sixth sense
C'est un détecteur de morts	It is a detector of death
Je sais où sont enterrés	I know where our millions
Nos millions de cadavres...	Of bodies are buried...
Ecoutez ma voix de zombi	Listen to my zombie voice
En l'honneur de nos morts...	In honor of our dead...] <sup>121</sup>

And yet, this faculty to unearth the past and to give it a concrete voice is coupled with the zombie's repetitive use of the pronoun "je," drawing attention to his individual and direct involvement in the suffering described in the poem.

It becomes evident that Cap'tain zombi has more than one role in Depestre's poetic drama. The zombie does not stop at denouncing past

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<sup>120</sup> Depestre, "Un Arc-en-ciel," 146.

<sup>121</sup> *Rainbow*, 146-147.

crimes revealed to him, but carries their imprint on his own body and becomes one with the pain. He proclaims mournfully: “Je suis peuplé de cadavres/Peuplé de râles d’agonies/Je suis une marée de plaies/De cris de pus de caillots” [I am teeming with corpses/I am a tide of wounds/Of cries of pus of blood clots].<sup>122</sup> His complete identification with the visions of torture is precisely what affords him the power to serve as transformational martyr. Just like Girard’s *pharmakos* is a victim of all sorts of insults and violence, Depestre’s zombie undergoes the degradation experienced by those for whom he has become a spokesman. The physical violence he willingly endures and carries on his body, like we saw with the *pharmakos*, is the prerequisite for the transformation the poem has set to accomplish. Girard’s explanation is key because “the victim must draw unto himself all the malefic violence to transform it... into beneficial violence, into peace and fertility”.<sup>123</sup> That being the case, Cap’tain zombie, in conjunction with the other fifteen Loas participating in the ritual, becomes an essential instrument for bringing about a Vodou genesis, namely a reversal of violence, which if left unchecked could lead to the world’s destruction.<sup>124</sup>

The zombie has therefore been refashioned, in Depestre’s imagination, into a Haitian healing divinity with the potential to transform

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<sup>122</sup> *Rainbow*, 146-147.

<sup>123</sup> René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*. Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1972. 144.

<sup>124</sup> *Rainbow*, 251. In note 1 to the section “The Early Morning Bath” provided by Joan Dayan in her translation of the poem, she indicates: “this new bath is a symbol of the ‘lavé-tête’ ritual in Voodoo, an act of spiritual genesis that induces the birth of a soul through the cleansing properties of water.”

not just Haiti but the entire planet. The poet has recovered the Vodou tradition to transform the zombie, an object of dread, into a rhapsody of human renewal. The mournful complaint of the zombie and his participation in the ritual bath make possible the final image of a “little Haitian lamp” illuminating the way for man’s flight towards freedom:

...une petite lampe haïtienne	[...a little Haitian lamp
Qui essuis en riant ses larmes	That wipes away its tears while
	smiling
Et d’un seul coup d’ailes s’élève	And with one beat of its wings
Pour être à tout jamais un homme	Rises for ever and ever a man
Jusqu’aux confins du ciel debout	As far as the ends of the sky
	upright
Et libre dans la verte innocence	And free in the green innocence]

We are far from the representation of the zombie as an alienated individual, as a voiceless victim, or worse, as an insane and unconscious creature. Depestre makes sure this reversal is palpable when the zombie addresses the white world and summons them to listen, at least seven times, to his account. The refrain “Ecoutez monde blanc” [Listen white world] leaves very little ambiguity about the zombie’s function within the poet’s spiritual possession by the Loas. He has been transformed into the voice of all the racially oppressed across the globe. And in this gesture, Depestre deterritorializes the zombie’s complaint out of Haiti and into a larger black Atlantic experience. This explains why Depestre assembles a long list of crimes perpetrated by a white Christian West across the planet, and puts them in the lips of Cap’tain Zombi as he confronts the family at the center of the ritual by declaring:

Ecoutez monde blanc	[Listen white world
Les salves de nos morts	To the volleys of our dead
Ecoutez mon silence de mer...	Listen to my sea-silence...
O chant désolé de nos morts	Oh desolate chant of our
	dead...
Mon sang déchirant ma tristesse	My blood shredding my
	anguish
Sur tous les chemins du monde	Over all the world's
	roads] <sup>125</sup>

And it is important to note that the image of spilled blood across all of the world's roads includes that stemming from cotton, coffee and sugar plantations in the Americas, from the Congo-Ocean railway in Africa, from Chicago's slaughterhouses and from every place where the exploitation of men by men has built industries and empires.<sup>126</sup> It is not just limited to that of Saint-Domingue, or even the Caribbean. The zombie's sacrifice is intended to deliver every corner of the planet from atomic destruction, that is, to save humanity from self-destruction.

As the title suggests "A Rainbow for the Christian West" constitutes a religious offering for the western world. The preposition "for" implies that it is a gift, or an oblation in the religious sense, meant to bring about a transformative experience in spiritual terms. After all, the rainbow stands as symbol for hope across several world mythologies since it represents a divine sign of an imminent

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<sup>125</sup> *Arc-en-ciel*, 148.

<sup>126</sup> The Congo-Ocean railway connects the port city of Pointe-Noire and Brazzaville. It was built by the French colonial administration in 1921 with forced labor, and it has been reported that at least 170000 workers lost their lives due to accidents and malaria. Chicago's slaughterhouses were rendered infamous by muckraker journalist Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* where dire working conditions and wage slavery are described and denounced.

renewal after a destructive flood.<sup>127</sup> Depestre's rainbow, and by extension the poem in its entirety, symbolizes his poetic hope for a new beginning based on the inclusive syncretism of Haitian Vodou. Cap'tain Zombi, as one of its wise and powerful divinities, serves as a sacrificial agent towards the elaboration of a new worldview where the racism of the Christian West is healed. The violent history of colonization and its accompanying racial discrimination have been transformed into the promise of a new and more inclusive humanism through the intercession of the zombie.

It is worth noting that the poem does not entail an outright negation of the white Christian West, but rather constitutes a purification or transcendence of evil by the power of Vodou. The rewriting of the Christian sign of the cross included in the last stanza of the poem is significant since it announces an unequivocal communion with a former opponent. It appears immediately after the poet has sealed his fraternity with the West, in a move reminiscent of Baudelaire's "Au

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<sup>127</sup> In the Judeo-Christian imagination it represents a sign of God's new covenant with man after the flood, when God promises never to destroy the earth again. *Genesis 9:13-15*: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." *The Rainbow Serpent* exists in Africa, Oceania, Asia and America. In Haiti the rainbow serpent takes the name Dambalah Wèdo. "Rainbow serpent," *A Dictionary of World Mythology*. Arthur Cotterell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. "It is said that when Mawu was making the world, Aido-Hwedo, the rainbow serpent, was her servant. It is said that he came into existence with the first man and woman, Adanhu and Yewa. Aido-Hwedo carried Mawu in his mouth wherever she wanted to go, which is why the Earth curves and winds: it was carved from the sinuous movements of the serpent. When Mawu had finished her work of creation, she saw that she had made too many things: too many trees, too many mountains, too much of everything. The Earth could not bear the weight. So she told Aido-Hwedo to coil himself into a circle beneath the Earth, to support it. There he lives provoking earthquakes and storms that begin in the sea."

Lecteur" in *Les Fleurs du Mal*."<sup>128</sup> The poet's blessing, where the Trinitarian formula of "In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit" has been replaced with "Au nom de la révolte/Et de la justice/Et de la tendresse"[In the name of revolt/And of justice/And of tenderness], heralds the transformation performed by the Loas.<sup>129</sup> With the help of the zombie, the authority of the Father has been transformed into an ongoing revolt; the deliverance of the Son now stands as a promise of justice; and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit involves an endless motion towards tenderness. If Depestre closes the poem with the image of a rewritten Christian prayer, it is because the Loas have accomplished their healing, and now their syncretic wisdom has contributed to the foundation for a new humanism. Two other depestrian zombies would attempt a similar liberation by performing a ritualistic sacrifice in the name of the collectivity.

### 2.2.3. Zombie as Hero of the Absurd

The zombie in *Le Mat de cocagne* also accommodates the contradictory duality of Girard's *pharmakos*. This time the zombie, under the imaginative writing of Depestre, embodies a victim and a redeemer whose physical sacrifice transforms the violence of the depraved rule of the tyrant Zoocrate Zacharie into the community's liberation. Henri Postel's death at the summit of the greasy pole, a

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<sup>128</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Au Lecteur," *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996, 34. "— Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!" [— Hypocrite reader, —my equal, —my brother] There are other parallels to be drawn between Baudelaire and Depestre but they are not necessary for our purposes of describing the zombie as an instrument for transformation. For instance, both poets perform a denunciation of man's hypocrisy, which becomes the basis for their aesthetic project.

<sup>129</sup> *Un Arc-en-ciel*, 236, 237.

vertical axis packed with religious and political symbolism, is not a defeat but a victory. It restores hope in the hearts of his countrymen who had been imprisoned by fear, and recuperates Vodou from the political manipulation of a corrupt leader. The zombie's sacrifice immortalizes the life of a man who was otherwise condemned to an anonymous death, and rescues the imagination of an entire nation in chains. Depestre proposes a view of the zombie as an agent for collective consciousness and renewal, almost a Caribbean Sisyphus who marches towards his absurd torment—fully conscious of its futility—but happy.

*Le Mât de cocagne* presents a satirical account of the political situation of Haiti, a nation where a dictator—described in animal terms—has manipulated the symbols of the popular religion of Vodou to wage a campaign of terror against its citizens.<sup>130</sup> This is clearly a parodic allegory of Duvalier's use of Vodou in Haitian politics, a strategy that for decades allowed his rule to suppress the opposition by claiming divine authority.<sup>131</sup> Henri Postel is a former senator who has been sentenced to a "new and improved" form of zombification for his opposition to the regime, which consists on being forced to work—until the end of his days—in a monotonous grocery store, banished from public life, but fully conscious of his

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<sup>130</sup> The name of the president "Zoocrate" betrays a play in words suggesting some form of animalistic proclivities.

<sup>131</sup> David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. 232 "A constantly recurring feature of Duvalier's presidential speeches and messages was the introduction of religious symbols to reinforce his claims to legitimacy...Duvalier portrayed himself as divinely chosen; his work was 'une mission sacro-sainte,' and a crusade."



fate.<sup>132</sup> The senator-turned-zombie challenges his punishment by participating in the competition of climbing the greasy pole, a yearly national festival.<sup>133</sup> This decision is an outright provocation to the regime that had tried to confine him within the walls of his depressing shop in Tête-Boeuf, an imaginary small town in the surrounding area of Port-au-Prince. But when Postel wins the competition and successfully reaches the top of the pole before the other contestants, he is shot dead by a hidden sniper. Postel meets the deadly fire with a burst of laughter, in one last gesture of revolt.

But even before the zombified Postel can embark on what he considers to be a sacrificial journey to liberate the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of Tête-Boeuf, he is the object of mockery and ridicule. In fact, some of his acquaintances are unable to understand his purpose and think he has lost a grasp on reality—calling him “espèce de vieux con mystique” [you mystical old idiot].<sup>134</sup> This is the case of David Ritson, the sailor who was helping him plan an exilic escape aboard

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<sup>132</sup> Zombification does not entail a loss of consciousness, but the opposite. President Zacharie describes Postel’s zombification as follows: “Je veux voir Postel se mouvoir librement dans la société des hommes, avec ses souvenirs, ses sensations, ses idées, ses goûts et ses haines. Il n’aura l’air absent ni le regard vitreux de nos traditionnels mort-vivants, Il faut qu’il demeure jusqu’au bout conscient de son état.” [I want to see Postel move freely in human society, with his memories, feelings, ideas tastes and dislikes. He won’t have either a dazed appearance or the glassy stare of our traditional living-dead. He must remain conscious to the very end.] Depestre, *Le Mât de Cocagne*, 14. Carrol F. Coates, *The Festival of the Greasy Pole*, 6.

<sup>133</sup> The contest of the greasy pole is a folkloric tradition across several Spanish, English and French-speaking cultures where participants attempt to climb a vertical pole that has been previously made slippery with oil or soap. In the span of three days (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) and after several attempts, the contestants compete against each other to reach the top of the pole, where some form of reward has been lodged.

<sup>134</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mât de cocagne*, 43. Coates, 26.

the Manitoba towards Canada, and cannot comprehend why Postel would rather stay in the island to participate in a foolish contest. He adds that “Aucun spectacle n’a jamais libéré des esclaves” [No burlesque performance ever freed any slaves] alluding to the myth of Mackandal’s victory over death in 1791 and its ostensible role in igniting the Saint-Domingue revolution.<sup>135</sup> Ritson shows very little patience for symbolic victories over the regime, particularly those grounded on Vodou and its mythology. Similarly, the psychiatrists charged with evaluating Postel’s mental abilities believe that he has gone insane and has started to show signs of multiple personality disorder. They explain his paranoid condition as follows:

La névrose du citoyen Postel, qui évoluait lentement depuis des années, a connu une sorte d’accélération... Ce brusque désir de grimper à un arbre de nature phallique, devant une foule hostile, est caractéristique de cette sorte de délire paranoïaque...<sup>136</sup>

[Citizen Postel’s neurosis, which had been evolving for years, underwent a kind of acceleration, a well-known phenomenon in psychiatry. This abrupt desire to climb a tree of phallic nature, in front of a hostile crowd is characteristic of that type of paranoid delirium...]<sup>137</sup>

What is sure is that the zombie’s sudden and obsessive desire to participate in the contest, usually reserved to the lowest criminals, constitutes proof of his mental frailty in many people’s minds. Despite this diagnosis, the president and his cronies admit him into the competition, turning a blind eye to the doctor’s assessment, but

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<sup>135</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mât de Cocagne*, 41. Coates, *Festival of the Greasy Pole*, 24. Mackandal was the name of a slave and Vodou priest who was burned alive in Saint-Domingue for his role in organizing a large revolt and poisoning French planters. According to the legend that grew around his name, he defied death by transforming into a butterfly.

<sup>136</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mât de Cocagne*. 60.

<sup>137</sup> Coates, 37-38.

mostly motivated by the fact they consider his chances for success very slim. His presumed idiocy paves the way, and is almost a requirement, for his emancipation of the collective imagination in *Tête-Boeuf*.

It is significant that once Depestre has established that Henri Postel is the most pathetic and contemptible character in the eyes of many in the city, he sets out to show that the opposite is also true. In fact, many consider him a paragon of heroism and purity. This is why Maître Horace's unfailing counsel is always by his side, so Cisafleur's knowledge of Vodou is put to service in a ritual destined to embolden his physical strength, and Elisa Valéry's loving hands perform a fortifying erotic massage unto the man's tired body in preparation for the final contest. They recognize their friend's ability to transform his own degradation into an awakening for all those around him, and by extension the sole path for the community's freedom: In Maître Horace's own words, Postel

du fond de sa déchéance... il a su brusquement s'élever à une sorte de pureté et de fermeté de caractère qui le portent vouloir avec passion une seule chose au monde...le souci... d'offrir à son peuple... un exemple apte à le réveiller de sa condition...<sup>138</sup>

And we see how Postel's ability to transform himself from being the utmost symbol of degradation into an instrument for passionate awakening is in fact very similar to that of Depestre vis-à-vis the zombie. Here the writer is clearly creating a parallel between Postel's overcoming of his punishment in the novel and his own artistic engagement with the figure of the zombie in Haitian literature.

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<sup>138</sup> Depestre, 98.

But Postel's friends are not the only ones who admire him. On the first day of the festival, a large crowd gathers in the aptly named "place des Héros" to greet him with the reverence reserved for victors as he enters the site of the competition. The writer recounts the zombie's reception as follows:

A mesure que Postel avançait dans la foule, ceux qui le reconnaissaient s'écartaient avec émotion, pour lui frayer un passage. En un instant, son nom, chuchoté de bouche en bouche, fit le tour de la place, et des milliers de regards cherchaient de partout à le distinguer. L'homme marchait d'un pas ferme, la tête levée, fixant ses yeux souriants, tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche, pour répondre aux saluts et aux vivats.<sup>139</sup>

The frenzy surrounding his entrance foreshadows his success atop the greasy pole and the optimism that would be born out of his victory, even after his death. The emotion he inspires among the crowd of excited onlookers mirrors the zombie's own smiling eyes, as they all realize the significance of his challenge to the regime. This reception is diametrically opposed, however, to the disparaging comments of the doctors described earlier, and highlights Depestre's strategy of articulating how the comedic misadventures of a man atop of a slippery piece of wood can also be understood as valiant acts of heroism. In other words, how the zombie—a symbol for despair, condemnation and servility for some—can be for others an allegory for hope, redemption, and liberty.

Postel's zombification does not reduce his mental abilities, nor does it make him a slave to a master. On the contrary, it intensifies the urgency of his design to liberate his countrymen from the grips of terror, an aspiration that earns him a

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<sup>139</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mat de Cocagne*, 83.

reputation of having become an idealistic fool. Even if Postel realizes that his actions are unlikely to unseat the tyrant, they perform a symbolic liberation of the people's imagination. In his own words his attempt would restore the lost self-esteem of the nation: "Vous allez voir ce qu'un zombie peut tenter pour recouvrer l'estime de sa patrie".<sup>140</sup> All the descriptions surrounding the zombie betray an effort on Depestre's part to dismantle the myth of the passive victim. The writer shows that even if the political conditions of the nation can have a permanent imprint on the physical body, they cannot eliminate the individual's desire for freedom. And thus we see why even if Postel's body carries the imprint of his punishment, his eyes preserve the seed of his imminent revolt.

L'homme était arrivé à Tête-Boeuf avec un physique d'athlète. Maintenant il avait laidement épaissi au cou, aux épaules, au ventre et aux fesses. Il avait la nuque, le bas du visage et les mains vivement striés de rides. Tout en lui allait à la dérive, sauf ses bras qui conservaient de la force et ses yeux paraissaient parfois moins vieillis que le reste de ses traits.<sup>141</sup>

His punishment has reduced his agility and has added extra weight to his movements, but also emboldened his spirit. Whereas the zombie's eyes for other writers betray the zombie's spiritual death in their "absent look" and "glassy gaze," Postel's eyes are more alive than the rest of his body. They preserve the seed of the zombie's revolt that will burst forth after his participation in a life-giving Vodou ritual.

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<sup>140</sup> Depestre, *Mât de cocagne*, 35.

<sup>141</sup> *Le mat de cocagne*, 17.

The rehabilitation of the figure of the zombie in *Le Mât de cocagne* is inextricably related to Depestre's desire to recuperate the poetics of Vodou from the political manipulation of Duvalier's *noirisme*. Much like we saw with Cap'tain Zombie in *Un Arc-en-ciel*, Vodou remains a central element in the writer's creative arsenal for conveying the emancipatory quality of the sacred within the Haitian imagination. Vodou for the writer is a constitutive part of what he calls the "réel merveilleux haitien," a poetic, imaginative and emancipatory engagement with reality that blends the European and African cultural influences that came together in Haiti to produce a new creolized religion. But Vodou is more than a syncretic or hybrid religion for Depestre. It is a form of *marronage*, a rebellious consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that reflects the creativity, dynamism, and negotiation that were required to survive in a system of oppression.<sup>142</sup>

This view of Vodou explains why the writer includes two very different rituals within the novel. The ritual carried out in the name of the President, invoking Baron Samedi—the Loa of death—and the one performed by the mambo Cisaflour and her niece Elisa, summoning Papa-Loko and Erzili Freda—Loas of healing and love. They allow the writer, on the one hand, to denounce Duvalier's perversion of Vodou, and on the other hand, to bring to the foreground how Vodou

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<sup>142</sup> The writer explains that Vodou constitutes a creative engagement with reality that allowed the men and women living in the brutal regimes of slavery and colonization to adapt to the violent form of life imposed on them in Saint-Domingue. René Depestre, *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude*, 239. « Au lieu d'assimiler docilement les leçons de la catéchèse, ils les syncrétisèrent avec les valeurs *yoruba*, *fanti-ashanti*, *bantou*, *congo*, *fon*, auxquelles la mémoire et l'imaginaire collectifs prêtèrent de nouvelles fonctions liées aux besoins affectifs et moraux de la plantation américaine. »

remains a source for creative healing, a way of adapting and surviving in the midst of tragedy, in other words, it allows the writer to restore Vodou to its expansive poetic and revolutionary sphere.<sup>143</sup>

It is essential to keep in mind that François Duvalier had exploited Vodou and its symbols to secure absolute and total political control over the masses in Haiti. He theatrically staged his authoritarian presidency as an extension of Vodou and would fashion his appearance to fit traditional representations of Baron Samedi, the Loa of death.<sup>144</sup> He also enlisted Vodou priests to help enforce his rule, adding a subtle layer of fear to his brutal use of violence.<sup>145</sup> His power was cemented on a campaign of terror that secured loyalty by appealing to Haitian folk beliefs that saw his personification of the Loa of death as confirmation that he had sovereignty over life and death.

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<sup>143</sup> René Depestre, *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude*. Paris: Seghers, 1980. 103.

“Interprétant de manière fantastique les malheurs et les mystères de la traite et de la colonie, les esclaves...imaginèrent à leur tour des religions natives de défense et de combat dotées d’une structure symbolique et mythologique qui correspondait à leurs besoins et à leur désir inassouvis d’hommes terriblement humiliés et offensés...les esclaves opposèrent farouchement des cultes autochtones... formes mystifiées de consciences rebelles »

<sup>144</sup> Katherine Smith, “Genealogies of Gede.” *In Extremis Death and Life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Haitian Art*. Ed. Donald. J. Cosentino. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012. 95: “ ‘Duvalier’s very physiognomy, accoutered in black hat, glasses and cane...and even speaking in that spirit’s nasal tones, was a bridge that linked representations of religious power, and national authoritarian power’. With his background as an ethnologist, Duvalier was undoubtedly aware that the trappings of state spectacles employed symbols and other emblems from the Vodou imaginary.”

<sup>145</sup> For a detailed account on how Duvalier built a terror apparatus in Haiti see Erica Caple James, *Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma and Intervention in Haiti*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

Depestre's representation of the president ridicules this manipulation through the description in which the latter appears as a farcical bull mooing, lifting his shoulders and displaying swastika symbols on his front, chin, chest, stomach and penis. He describes the president attempting a symbolic transformation at the hands of one of his priests as follows:

Ensuite Siméon... noua un foulard rouge à la tête du président et le coiffa d'une couronne de bougies allumées. Puis il lui donna à boire du *kimanga*, du *migan* et du *mavangou*. Tandis que son excellence éternuait, la langue pendante, le *bokor* lui traça à l'indigo des croix gammées sur le front, le menton, la poitrine, le ventre et la verge en état d'énergie... le président se mit à beugler et à rentrer sa tête dans les épaules, de l'air furieux d'un taureau qui allait foncer.<sup>146</sup>

[Then Simon...tied a red scarf around the president's head and put a crown of lighted candles on his head. Then Simon had him drink from three bottles containing *kimanga*, *migan*, and *mavangou*. His excellency sneezed, with his tongue hanging out, the bokor drew swastikas in indigo on his forehead, chin, chest stomach and erect penis...President Zacharie started bellowing and pulling his head down unto his shoulders, with the furious look of a bull about to charge] <sup>147</sup>

This comical representation of the president in a Vodou trance—as he sneezes and sticks his tongue out—is contrasted with the life-giving, and emancipatory ritual at the hands of sor Cisaflour and Elisa. A very different ceremony indeed, since Depestre details how the zombie's encounter with a beautiful woman gives him a new lease on life and returns all his lost potency.

Postel la reçut soudain comme une merveilleuse transfusion de sang. Sa beauté libérait en lui le courant gelé... Vivre, vivre, vivre... Son sang redevenait léger, luron, intrépide. Elisa lui donnait le grand

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<sup>146</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mât de Cocagne*. 160-161.

<sup>147</sup> Coates, *The Festival*, 107.



bonjour du feu. C'était tout le contraire de Baron-Samedi et de son électrification des âmes...<sup>148</sup>

[Postel received her suddenly like a marvelous blood transfusion. Her beauty released in him the frozen current...To live, live, live...His blood became once more light, gay, intrepid. Elisa was presenting him with the incredible greeting of fire. It was the complete opposite of Baron Samedi and his electrification of souls.]<sup>149</sup>

The counterrite by Cisaflour and Elisa is not only intended to upend the dictator's version, but also represents Depestre's rescuing Vodou from a destructive phantasmagorical interpretation for political gain. The writer returns Vodou's poetical manifestation to the realm of the imagination where it translates the struggle for survival into a continual form of revolt and creative negotiation. Just like the zombie had ceased to represent hopeless oppression now Vodou stands as an emancipatory impulse. As we will see below, yet another reversal would take place in *Le Mat de cocagne*.

That Postel's death should be described in terms of a birthing and a source of both light and nourishment for the inhabitants of Tête-Boeuf is significant. It highlights to what extent Depestre conceives the zombie as a sacrificial hero whose death heralds a new life for the community. After being fatally wounded at the summit of the greasy pole, his friends and supporters carry his body to the mountains where they "sing, dance and live his death with the drums of happy days," as he had previously requested of them.<sup>150</sup> His ordeal is celebrated rather than mourned because his lucidity—the hallmark trait of the zombie in Depestre's

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<sup>148</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mât de Cocagne*, 141.

<sup>149</sup> Coates, *The Festival of the Greasy pole*, 93.

<sup>150</sup> Coates, 97.

novel —has been disseminated to all those witnessing the contest. Elisa Valery establishes in her farewell of Postel that:

Tu seras un berceau joyeux pour tout ce qui naîtra de bien et de beau sur nos terres. Ta mort a suivi l'exemple de toute ta vie. Ta mort soutiendra la lumière des tiens, parce que de ton vivant tu a su élargir leur droit à l'espoir et à la liberté.<sup>151</sup>

[You will be the joyful cradle for everything good and beautiful that will be born in our land. Your death has followed the example of your life. Your death will support the light, the hope, and the beauty of your people because, when you lived, you were able to enlarge their right to fight and to dream.]<sup>152</sup>

Not only does his death elicit a celebration in accordance to his last wishes, but is also compared to childbirth and to the emergence of a guiding light that would accompany them for rest of their days. And when the reader is told that Postel's ashes quietly mix with the luscious landscape another heroic martyr comes to mind, impregnating with his insurrectional legacy Postel's end. Because Depestre has created a character after the model of Mackandal in Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this world* who upon burning at the stake defies death by transforming into an insect. Much like Mackandal keeps his promise to remain in the kingdom of this world and defies the white planters attempt to get rid of him, Postel remains in Tête-Boeuf deriding Zoocrate Zacharie's plan to make him disappear.<sup>153</sup> Both characters, even after their physical death, live on to inspire acts of rebellion in their name.

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<sup>151</sup> Depestre, *Le Mât de cocagne*, 206.

<sup>152</sup> Coastes, *The Festival of the Greasy Pole*, 139.

<sup>153</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *El Reino de este mundo*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009. 46. "Aquella tarde los esclavos regresaron a sus haciendas riendo por todo el camino. Mackandal había cumplido su promesa, permaneciendo en el reino de este mundo. Una vez mas eran burlados los blancos por los Altos Poderes de la Otra Orilla."

As we have seen, for Depestre the zombie remains a hero, even if he is a tragic and absurd one. Contrary to most writers in twentieth century Haitian literature who—as we saw earlier in the chapter—insist on depicting the zombie as a locus of literal and metaphorical national degradation, Depestre refuses to yield to such negative representations. It is important to highlight that, like all depestrian zombies, Postel not only preserves his mental abilities, but also displays a lucid grasp on the political reality around him. Paradoxically, the same lucidity that was intended to be his torment and punishment ignites his revolutionary impulse, and thus constitutes his victory. In the character of Postel, Depestre has brought together an amalgamation of several fictional heroes, who confront their enemy—whether windmills taken to be ferocious giants, a heavy boulder up a mountain, or white planters in Saint-Domingue—and refuse to relinquish their human agency. Even when they know, like Camus's Sisyphus, that their struggle is absurd and their efforts meaningless, their willingness to consciously confront their fate is enough to keep a man happy.<sup>154</sup> And so we understand why Postel meets his own death with laughter, while his mind and body constitute a painful and joyous yes to the tragedy that plagues his nation: "Son esprit et son corps étaient un seul *oui* à la fois douloureux et joyeux."<sup>155</sup> In *Le Mât de cocagne* Depestre has rewritten the tragedy

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<sup>154</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Paris : Gallimard, 1942. 167-168. « Toute la joie silencieuse de Sisyphe est là. Son destin lui appartient. Son rocher est sa chose. De même, l'homme absurde, quand il contemple son tourment, fait taire toutes les idoles... Mais Sisyphe enseigne la fidélité supérieure qui nie les dieux et soulève les rochers. Lui aussi juge que tout est bien. Cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile. Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral e cette montagne de pleine nuit, à lui seul forme un monde. La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux. »

<sup>155</sup> René Depestre, *Le Mât de cocagne*, 61.

of Sisyphus to meet the reality of his Caribbean island where the zombie stands as a Creole hero of the absurd.

### **2.3 Zombie as the Creole Identity**

There is nothing original or groundbreaking in using the zombie as a metaphor for Haiti. As we saw earlier when we surveyed how other twentieth century writers make use of this figure, the zombie has been a fruitful metaphor for conveying the historical, social and psychic degradation of Haitians and their island nation. The zombie has been synonymous with psychological alienation, madness, and individual impotence vis-à-vis an authoritarian regime. In many ways, the zombie has been a vehicle for writers to denounce and to dissect the predicament of those living in a country caught in a succession of political, economic and humanitarian crises. What is really unprecedented in Haitian literature, and across all of French Caribbean writing to be sure, is to use the zombie to represent an ideal as René Depestre does in his 1988 novel *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*.

With the zombie, Hadriana, we are very far from the lobotomized creature that remains powerless in the hands of her captors, or the voiceless victim trapped in a condition of servitude, and a long way indeed from the woman who has lost her mind. Instead, Depestre proposes the zombie as a beautiful and rebellious woman who embodies the hybrid and creolized condition of Haiti. For this writer, the zombie serves as a paragon of the creative ways different cultural worlds can coexist in one person—the Creole—not only sustaining deep contradictions, but also turning these into prolific sources for poetry and beauty. After providing a synopsis of the novel, we will look at how Depestre has structured the narrative

along two different accounts of the events surrounding Hadriana's presumed death and zombification. By allowing the readers to construct two very different pictures of Hadriana and her ordeal, Depestre critiques, on the one hand, the collective construction of an idealized and racialized representation of Haitian society and, on the other hand, corrects it by proposing a dynamic account of identity that goes beyond the black and white dichotomy.

*Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* tells the story of how a young and beautiful woman in Jacmel appears to die on the day of her wedding, turning what was supposed to be the celebration of her union to Hector into the town's carnivalesque farewell to her. We learn through the forty-year old recollections of Patrick Altamont—a male narrator and the young woman's cousin—that Hadriana collapses at the altar when she was about to marry the community's favorite son. The town decides to proceed with the scheduled festivities nonetheless. Her life and death are memorialized through a Vodou ritual followed by a Catholic mass, a narrative detail that anticipates the duality, if not plurality, that exists not only at the heart of the novel, but also within Hadriana's identity. After an entire day and night of celebration, the inhabitants of Jacmel discover that Hadriana's grave has been violated and her body is missing. Influenced by their beliefs in Vodou, the entire community is convinced that her corpse's disappearance means that she has been transformed into a zombie. Except she is not really dead and, although an evil *bokor* did attempt to turn her into a zombie, he has ultimately failed. Hadriana— we learn at the end of the novel—managed to escape her captors and sailed towards Jamaica,

where she has been living for nearly forty years, cutting all links with her jacmelian past and opening her life towards the Caribbean sea.

This is what Hadriana herself explains in the narrative included within Patrick's frame story. It should be noted that the novel is structured as a two-part narrative composed of, on the one hand, Patrick memories presented first, in the third person, and, on the other hand, Hadriana's own version of what happened to her, in the first person singular. These two accounts are significantly different; in fact, Hadriana's version corrects and clarifies the first where she is given a voice and authorial control over her own story. In Hadriana's revision, she restores her status as a mere mortal woman, rejecting the virginal entronement the whole community has imposed on her, and more importantly, asserting her condition as a Creole. Her account functions as a *mise en abyme* that not only displaces Patrick's frame story of her zombification, casting doubt on what truly happened forty years earlier, but also reorients the image of the zombie. This new discourse on the zombie helps Depestre to release Hadriana from a role of victim and to recast her into a heroic character, which, as we will see ahead, translates the position of those living in a hybrid culture.

By marrying Hector, Jacmel's favorite son, Hadriana was surrendering her person to the needs of the community, but her apparent death and zombification release her from that position. Her zombification, paradoxically, constitutes a form of liberation since she no longer has to carry for Jacmel a one-dimensional ideal of a white and virginal French beauty. This explains why she describes that upon

running away from her native town and escaping her captors, she re-discovers her more authentic self, which she is now at liberty to express like never before:

Dès ces premiers moments de ressaisie de ma liberté de femme, j'ai senti que mes épreuves m'avaient placée plus profondément au-dedans même de la vie. Je saurais désormais, mille fois mieux qu'avant, comment remplir chaque journée de la vie... D'avoir eu un horizon terriblement enchevêtré dans la mort et la vie à la fois rendrait mon existence plus vivante et plus sensible à la délicate complexité de tas de choses... Je saurais mieux écouter toutes mes voix de femme, avec toutefois le sentiment... que si la femme naturelle renaissait de ces épreuves mieux armée pour donner une valeur pleine à chaque instant de la vie, la femme sociale ne se remettrait jamais...<sup>156</sup>

[From the first moments when I recovered my womanly freedom, I felt that my ordeal had placed me at the heart of life itself. I would know, from now on and better than ever before, how to fill every day of my life... After having been trapped in between life and death, my existence would become more alive and more in tune with the delicate complexity of so many things... I would know how to listen to all my womanly voices, with the feeling that...if the natural woman was reborn from this ordeal, the social woman would never recover...]<sup>157</sup>

It is remarkable how Depestre renders Hadriana's zombification as the prerequisite for the heroine's reconnecting "with the heart of life itself" and recognizing the complexity of her identity. Her ordeal, as Jacmel's sacrificial victim, functions as a rebirth not for the town as it was the case for Henri Postel in *Le Mât de cocagne*, but for her. It leads to the zombie's appreciation of parts of her own nature that had remained repressed or denied, and which she now hears and is ready to proclaim without hesitation. In other words, zombification and her brief encounter with death heightened her awareness and allowed her to "listen to *all* (her) womanly voices." These voices profess, as we will see ahead, her Creole nature.

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<sup>156</sup> René Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 203-204.

<sup>157</sup> My translation

It should be noted that Depestre is writing a novel that takes its inspiration from Jacques Stephen Alexis' 1960 "Chronique d'un faux-amour," the short story we examined at the beginning of this chapter to illustrate how the literary zombie has been used as a figure of degradation. It would seem as if Depestre is echoing Alexis' denunciation of society's alienation in order to show how a solitary and rebellious heroine, (much like Cap'tain Zombie and Henri Postel) can escape societal imprisonment. And yet, whereas for Alexis the zombie-bride has been punished with zombification for acting in accordance with the bourgeoisie's disdainful attitude towards the peasant culture of Haiti (she was poisoned by her future father-in-law in view of her scorn for him), Hadriana escapes zombification precisely because she objects to her community's over-idealization of her person, that is, she challenges the image of herself as the embodiment of French values. Through her refusal to submit to their ideas of her—as white, pure, and virginal—she escapes zombification. Her avowal of an unbridled sexuality and her ritualistic splitting into a black mysterious figure, in opposition to what the community constructs around her, is not just her way to refuse zombification, but also a sign of her recovered, individual autonomy. In this regard Depestre dramatically distances himself from Alexis and remains hopeful towards the individual's ability to escape his milieu's alienation.

It is significant that in every description provided by the love-struck cousin and narrator, Patrick, Hadriana emerges as an idealized, white female figure. She is called Jacmel's "fille étoile," and



le don princier que la France de Debussy et de Renoir a fait à notre pays. Plus qu'une jeune fille de dix-neuf ans, la fée tutélaire de Jacmel est une rose piquée au chapeau du Bon Dieu...<sup>158</sup>

[the princely gift that Debussy and Renoir's France gave to our country. More than a nineteen-year-old young woman, the tutelary goddess of Jacmel is a stolen rose taken from the good Lord's hat...]

As the above description makes clear, she ceases to be a flesh and bone nineteen-year-old Haitian woman in order to represent instead her community's ethereal fascination with French ideals, or Jacmel's alienation, to put it into fanonian terms. These are qualities she embodies and reluctantly carries—to her detriment—for the sake of the whole community.

Jacmel's understanding of her identity focuses solely on the color of her skin and fails to take into account how much the young woman has been enriched and shaped by the popular culture into which she was born, ignoring how "l'enfance d'Hadriana fût illuminé par les contes époustouflants que les servants noires lui murmuraient à l'office ou dans le secret de sa chambre" [Hadriana's childhood was inhabited by the astonishing tales that the black servants would tell her in hushed voices during mass or in the secrecy of her room].<sup>159</sup> If Hadriana has been turned into a zombie, it is because Jacmel has projected its own obsessions with racial and sexual purity on to its "fille étoile."

Her greater-than-life position within the community becomes clear in Depestre's description of her processional entrance into the church as a large crowd of admirers follows her every move. The writer has recourse to religious language

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<sup>158</sup> René Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 38.

<sup>159</sup> *Hadriana*, 51. My translation.

to convey the range of emotions Hadriana's presence inspires in all those who witness her arrival:

Des familles entières retenaient leur souffle avec le sentiment de voir le spectacle de leur vie. Plusieurs jeunes filles de ma connaissance fondaient en larmes... C'était une émotion fort complexe: à mes yeux sa beauté était encore associée aux rêves de l'enfance, à la brulante virginité, au rythme émerveillant des règles, au doux foyer paternel, à la fraîcheur que le mariage enlève à jamais... La plupart des fidèles se mirent à genoux pour suivre la messe, dans un état de recueillement qui me rappela l'intensité des offices de la semaine sainte.<sup>160</sup>

[Entire families held back their breath under the impression they were witnessing the most important moment of their lives. Several young women, whom I knew quite well, broke into tears... It was a very complex emotion: for me her beauty was inextricably linked to childhood dreams, to a burning virginity, to the wondrous rhythm of menstruation, to the gentle fatherly home, to the freshness that is forever lost after marriage... Most of the faithful got on their knees during mass, in a deep state of reverence similar to that experienced during Easter celebrations.]

Slowed breathing, uncontrollable tears, knelling, and a respectful attitude usually reserved for holy week are some of the ways the crowd responds to Hadriana's sight. In fact, in her person converge not only the power of the sun, the dreams of childhood, and the fertility of life's cycles, but an all-encompassing sense of virginal purity that provokes erotic desire and consequently leads to her near-zombification at the hands of a lustful bokor. It would seem as if Hadriana walks towards her death, under the hopeful and excited gaze of all the inhabitants of Jacmel, as a *pharmakos*—or sacrificial victim—to expunge their community's inability to reconcile French culture with Haitian popular Vodou. Jacmel's bourgeois elite, in their unwillingness to see Hadriana's cultural ambiguity and Creoleness, that is, in

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<sup>160</sup> *Hadriana*, 45-46.

insisting that she solely represents French values, surrenders its most precious inhabitant as expiatory victim.

And yet, this unrealistic and super-human idea of her, as a white, virginal symbol of Haiti is constricting for her. She describes the white veil—representing her virginity—as suffocating. “J’étouffais sous le voile” [I was suffocating under the veil] she declares.<sup>161</sup> Because Hadriana is, beyond the representation her community wishes to impose on her, a rebel zombie. When she is finally allowed to speak, we learn that she has never fully accepted Jacmel’s idea of her. For instance, when confronted with her own image on a mirror, dressed in the wedding gown she will wear on the day of her sacrificial marriage to Hector, she expresses doubt at whether she indeed represents an ideal of French beauty. Upon seeing her reflection, she wrinkles her nose and sticks out her tongue as a sign of her non-conformity with that role:

Hadriana se (prêtait) corps et âme aux retouches de la robe...Elle se regardait dans la glace, donnait son avis, pour finir par froncer le nez et tirer la langue à l’idéal de beauté française...<sup>162</sup>

[Hadriana gave herself body and soul to the alterations of her gown... She would look at her reflection on the mirror, offer her opinion, and end up by wrinkling her nose and sticking her tongue out at the ideal of French beauty]

More importantly, in addition to rejecting her image as the portrayal of white French purity, she reveals that she does not comply with the virginal characterization everyone insists on seeing in her.

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<sup>161</sup> *Hadriana*, 156.

<sup>162</sup> *Hadriana*, 44.

Because Hadriana, in her own words, is far from a saint and has thoroughly enjoyed her sexuality not just with her husband-to-be Hector, but also with Patrick and Lolita, one of her female friends. Challenging the priest who calls her a saint, she replies:

Moi, une sainte? J'ai été capable, mon père, par deux fois avant le « au-mariage-seulement », d'ouvrir ma chair à autrui les yeux fermés: il s'en était fallu d'un cheveu de blonde que Patrick se décidât à passer outre à l'éblouissement de sa grande main d'adolescent sur mon amande pour piquer un plongeon de mâle dans une eau femelle rageusement consentante. Avec Hector... ça avait été pareil : la boîte aux rêves avait été prête à livrer son dernier mystère de vierge. Parlez d'une sainte... j'ai péché ! Une autre fois...j'étais nue dans la chambre en compagnie de Lolita Philisbourg. Le charbon noir et mauve de mon sexe de dix-sept ans criait dans la cendre brûlante de ses caresses. J'étais ravie d'avoir dans sa bouche mon amande... afin qu'elle l'élève follement au septième ciel, à travers trois, cinq, et même en ce jour béni des dieux, jusqu'à sept orgasmes successifs.<sup>163</sup>

[Me, a saint ? I was capable, my father, even twice before the "only-in-marriage" to surrender my flesh to another with both eyes closed: Patrick was on the verge of going beyond the amazement of his large hand over my almond and plunging his maleness into my furiously willing female waters. With Hector... it was the same: the box of dreams was prepared to surrender her last virginal mystery. To speak of a saint... I have sinned! Another time... I was naked in the room with Lolita Philisbourg. The black and mauve charcoal of my seventeen-year-old sex screamed within the burning ashes of her caresses. I was overjoyed to have her mouth over my almond...she would madly elevate it to the seventh heaven, after three, five, and even in that godly day, up to seven consecutive orgasms.]<sup>164</sup>

By proclaiming her erotic self and revealing her previous unfettered sexual conduct, she refutes the collective idealization of herself.<sup>165</sup> In these remarks Hadriana

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<sup>163</sup> *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 171-172.

<sup>164</sup> My translation

<sup>165</sup> An entire dissertation could be written on Depestre's use of sexuality and the erotic in his fiction as a vehicle for expressing individual rebellion vis-à-vis societal codes of conduct and a form of transgression akin to that proposed by George Bataille's *Litterature et le mal*. The erotic aesthetic is for Depestre a complex fusion

declares her independence from Jacmel, a position that reaches its pinnacle when the zombie becomes fully conscious of the role she has been required to fulfill for the community.

It is remarkable that instead of leading to dispossession, when Depestre's heroine undergoes zombification, she is granted a greater degree of consciousness. In addition to having the wherewithal to assert her formerly repressed and denied sexuality, she also sees aspects of her personality, which had only been hinted at before. Which explains why, at the height of the ritual, when Hadriana is slowly being converted into a zombie, she has a revelatory vision. In it, she ceases to be white woman and sees herself as a black beauty:

J'ai vue l'inconnue Noire d'une extrême beauté, enlever son voile et se diriger nue vers mon cercueil. Elle s'est inclinée. J'ai vue ses deux seins suspendus au-dessus de moi. J'ai eu envie de mordre à leur fête haut remontée : de gros tétés gonflés de vie et de lyrisme, ronds, fermes, en suspens sur mon abîme affamé, j'ai reconnu mes propres mamelons déguisés en seins de négresse au carnaval de mon mariage.<sup>166</sup>

[I saw a mysterious Black female, of extreme beauty, remove her veils and move naked towards my coffin. She leaned forward. Her two breasts were hanging above me. I had the longing to bite into their high upstanding feast: big tits swollen with life and lyricism, round, firm, suspended over my famished abyss, I recognized my own nipples disguised as the breasts of the negress in this carnival of my marriage.]

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that encompasses the acceptance of the sensual, as it appears in Haitian Vodou, the reinvention of the world through the imagination, where the sexual act serves as a metaphor for Creolization—the coming together of two different elements to make a third, greater than its parts. Although it is present in the poet's early works, it becomes Depestre's main creative tool after his disillusionment with Marxism.

<sup>166</sup> René Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 178.

When her black double unveils and reveals her nakedness, she offers life and poetry to Hadriana. The outpouring from her voluptuous breast rescues Hadriana from the constrictive and famished abyss that had imprisoned her. As a matter of fact, her black double releases her from the one-dimensional perception of her identity as a white beauty since Hadriana is both. For Joan Dayan this scene in the novel is significant because it represents the moment when Hadriana discovers the blackness in herself. Dayan adds that Hadriana's apparent death and zombification do not lead to madness, but constitute a conversion ritual that leads to Hadriana's gradual creolization.<sup>167</sup>

There are several indicators that the eponymous heroine in *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* is a larger metaphor of Haiti.<sup>168</sup> By using a female character—identified as a star—to represent the journey of an entire nation, Depestre is positioning his 1988 novel along the same line as the first Haitian foundational novel *Stella* by Emeric Bergeaud, as well as the first postcolonial Algerian narrative *Nedjma* by Kateb Yacine.<sup>169</sup> Woman, in her sexuality, fertility and elusiveness,

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<sup>167</sup> Joan Dayan, "France reads Haiti: René Depestre's *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*," *Yale French Studies*, No. 83. *Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, and Nomadisms*, Volume 2, 1993. 154-175.

<sup>168</sup> Lise Gauvin, *L'Écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues*. Paris: Karthala, 1997. When asked the meaning of the novel's title and the reasons behind such an unusual spelling of the name "Adriana", Depestre explains during an interview with Lise Gauvin that he had initially conceived the character of his heroine without the "H" but was caught in a terrible writer's block. When he added the H to her name, a typographical addition that the writer acknowledges is the "umbilical H" of the word "Haiti," he was able to liberate his block and return to the joys of writing.

<sup>169</sup> As we have pointed out before, Hadriana is Jacmel's "fille étoile" while Emeric Bergeaud's title, *Stella*, uses the Latin word for "star." Similarly, Kateb Yacine's narrative of national identity, *Nedjma*, uses the Arabic word for "star," a detail which is referenced in the title of *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*' second chapter "L'étoile

functions as a powerful and conducive allegory for these writers to translate their desire to celebrate the nation, to chronicle certain parts of its history, and to convey the cultural hybridity of “la mère-patrie”, the motherland. Individual dreams —like it is the case with Patrick in *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, Romulus and Remus in *Stella*, and Mustapha, Lakhdar, Rachid, and Mourad in *Nedjma*—are invested with private passion and imaginative excess to become a narrative formula that attempts to contain the uncontainable. Because Hadriana, like Stella and Nedjma before her, remain inaccessible, positioned in the skies above, possibly referencing Depestre and Bergeaud’s exile from Haiti, and Yacine’s tragic conception of Algeria’s past and future. Through characters that are irremediably in love with an unattainable beautiful “fille étoile,” which is worshipped in almost religious terms, Depestre, like others before him, conveys his attachment to the native land. A country that remains difficult to define since it is traversed by contradictions, but that prevails because of its beauty. A vision that proves superior to the vicissitudes of politics and history, even if it cannot be contained. For as Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken points out, “Depestre’s novels manipulates its readers into the labyrinth of a Glissantian ‘Poetics of Relation’ ” where they have to relinquish the temptation to locate Hadriana within any foreseeable stable binary (black/white; French/Haitian).<sup>170</sup>

With the impenetrable zombie Hadriana—who is both white and black, both French and Haitian—Depestre is addressing how Haiti, a country whose culture is

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qui n’a brillé qu’une fois”, and which is followed by an epigraph taken from the text itself: “J’ai vu mourir l’étoile qui n’a brillé qu’une fois.”

<sup>170</sup> Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, *Spirit Possession in French, Haitian, and Vodou Thought*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. 202.

the product of a process of creolization and thus cannot be identified in terms of purity, remains tragically divided along racial and religious distinctions. As Patrick reports after Hadriana's death,

Dès lors une lute sans merci s'amorça entre les deux systèmes de croyances qui se disputent depuis toujours l'imaginaire des Haïtiens: la foi chrétienne et la foi vaudou.<sup>171</sup>

[A struggle without mercy began from that moment forward between the two belief systems that have always fought over the imagination of Haitians: the Christian faith and the Vodou faith]

Here the writer is critiquing what he considers one of the false problems that have plagued his native land's collective psyche: the religious and racial boundaries that have pitted brothers against one another. It is clear, then, that Depestre is alluding to what for David Nicholls has been the paradox of Haiti since its independence, namely how racial consciousness was, on the one hand, a unifying factor for the new nation while, on the other hand, color prejudices and rivalries between mulattoes and blacks have fueled political struggles, fostered the rise of authoritarian leaders, and contributed to economic dependence.<sup>172</sup>

For Depestre the idea of race is a colonial legacy imbued with the lies, rationalizations, and violence that made the exploitation in the Americas possible. These notions are to be abolished and replaced by a decolonial thinking that transcends a fictitious binary:

Une fois décolonisés, les notions magiques de « blanc », de « noir », de « métis », révèlent ce qu'elles ont toujours été dans leurs structure

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<sup>171</sup> *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 49.

<sup>172</sup> David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979. 1: "How is it that racial pride should have been among the principal causes of Haitian independence, while colour prejudice should have been one the chief factors undermining this independence?"



intime : des signes et des pièges grossiers, propre à l'imaginaire du colonialisme... Au cours des derniers siècles, les peuples du monde ont donc vécu sous la *fausse identité* ... à défaut de vivre leur identité panhumaine. Ce déguisement... visait à créer partout des sous-Europes, peuplées de sous-Latins et des sous-Anglo-Saxons... Cette tératologie expérimentale connut cependant un échec flagrant. Des peuples nouveaux se constituèrent dans les colonies, doués de leur propre créativité, différents du modèle qu'on avait posé sous leurs yeux comme la mesure idéale de la condition humaine.<sup>173</sup>

[After decolonization, the magical notions of “white”, “black”, “metis” revealed what they always were in their most intimate structure: crude traps and signs, belonging to the imagination of colonialism... Throughout the last centuries, the people of the world lived therefore under a *false identity*... instead of living their panhuman identity. This disguise...sought to create under-developed Europes everywhere, inhabited by under-developed Latins and under-developed Anglo-Saxons... this experimental teratological creation was met with a glaring defeat. New nations were born in the colonies, endowed with their own creativity, different from the models that had been imposed on them as the ideal human condition.]

The zombie's liminal state becomes, then, the perfect conduit for conveying a novel configuration on identity that eliminates the distinctions Depestre critiques in the passage above. It translates a *pensée-autre* that desists from prolonging the models inherited from Europe. It is through the liminal position of the zombie—a location that opens the realm of new possibilities—that Depestre, as a writer who is committed to offering a different *imaginaire*, effects his vision unwaveringly freed of the weight of race. As Victor Turner's epigraph at the opening of this chapter indicates,

Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense a source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> René Depestre, *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude*. Paris: Seghers, 1980, 9.

<sup>174</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 97.

The zombie's liminality allows the writer to articulate what he calls a panhuman identity, or Creoleness—that is, a new form of logic that ceases to rely on a false racial dichotomy—and to propose a different way of relating. Unencumbered by these fabricated oppositions (black/white, French/Haitian, Catholic/ Vodou), antagonisms that have contributed to the splintering of Haitian society, the zombie offers a new vision of humanity.

With Hadriana's unstable descriptions, as both black and white, French and Haitian, Depestre eliminates the very notion of race as a category and proposes instead: the Creole. Depestre's novel—published in 1988— is anticipating what Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant would spell out in their 1989's *Eloge de la créolité*: a new *imaginaire* that forges a novel sense of humanity, the precursor of the globalized world we described in the preceding chapter, and which is greater than its individual parts.

Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united of the same soil by the yoke of history. For three centuries the islands and parts of continents affected by this phenomenon proved to be the real forges of a new humanity, where languages, races, religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment where they had to reinvent life... permanently questioning, always familiar with the most complex ambiguities... we are the anticipation of the relations of cultures, of the future world whose signs are already showing...<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Bernabé, Confiant, Chamoiseau, *Eloge de la créolite*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989. 87-88.

The zombie's liminality thus becomes a positive quality, reinforcing Depestre's intention—as we saw with Cap'tain Zombi and Henri Postel—to recover this Haitian figure from its recurrent negative literary representations.

It is appropriate, then, that Hadriana would be identified as a being possessed by the loa Simbi-la-Source—Legba's messenger—when she encounters a group of migrants who are about to set sail towards Jamaica. As the emissary of the Loa of the crossroads, Hadriana connects the heavens and the abyss, and represents a third shore: she is the embodiment of a third way or of a *pensée-autre*:

Simbi-la-Source, wa-yo!	[Simbi-la-Source, wa-yo!
Simbi est sortie de son mystère	Simbi withdrew from her
	mystery
Pour bénir notre grand voilier,	To bless our large sailboat,
Simbi est la tête et le ventre	Simbi is the head and the
	stomach
Et la troisième rive de l'eau! <sup>176</sup>	And the third water shore!]

In the incantation above, the group acknowledges how Hadriana's presence is a positive sign, a blessing for their upcoming journey into the Caribbean Sea.

Hadriana, like Cap'tain Zombi and Henri Postel, is elevated to the status of a Vodou divinity and ceases to be a figure of dread. Instead she guides the group to their destination and she connects Haiti to other shores, literally opening the island to the rest of the world or the *Tout-Monde*. Here Milo Rigaud's description of Simbi-la-Source provides an important contextual reference for Depestre's choice to include her as the final representation of Hadriana. Simbi is described as

a loa of many forms... the *conductor of souls* of the dead in all directions bordered by the four magic orients of the cross. He is the Messiah of Legba, the messenger of the sun. Simbi corresponds to the hermetic Mercury of the cabalistic alchemy of the ritual sacrifice.

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<sup>176</sup> *Hadriana*, 206.

Thus, he is simultaneously Hermes and Mercury—a boundary god or milestone-god of roads and highways, as well as a genius of points of crossing. Simbi is the creative principle...<sup>177</sup>

As a boundary goddess, Hadriana has the power to unite what was formerly divided, and to lead others towards bridging this separation.

Through a close reading of the characterization and purpose of the zombie in three different works by Depestre we have shown how and why the writer unearths a figure of dread from the Vodou pantheon to rehabilitate its positive qualities. While the zombie exists predominantly as a figure of degradation and has served as a symbol for its society's alienation, individual madness and collective impotence throughout most of twentieth-century Haitian literature, for Depestre, on the contrary, the zombie remains a hero. Whether a planetary healer, like Cap'tain Zombi, a hero of the absurd as Henri Postel, or the sketch of a new Creole humanity, like Hadriana, the zombie remains a positive character. Depestrian zombies call to mind the fierce courage of a slave by the name of Jean Zombi, a man who entered the Vodou pantheon for his fearless commitment to freedom during the Saint-Domingue revolution. They challenge the negative stereotype that pervades the global imagination and put forward a different narrative for the first black republic. If the zombie is to represent Haiti and Haitians, Depestre is committed to according this figure the courage, lucidity, and beauty he sees in his native island, and to offer this vision to his readers and by extension to the world.

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<sup>177</sup> Milo Rigaud, *Secrets of Vodou*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1953. 93.

## Chapter Three

### Condean Mourning From Collective Myth to Individual: A Path for Individual Lucidity

La vérité toujours si déplaisante à regarder a le corps hérissé de dards, de pointes qui finissent par déchirer les linges et les linceuls dont on l'entoure. Pour finir, on ne peut la retenir de se balader nue par les rues comme le roi du conte.

Maryse Condé, *La Vie Scélérate*

Grief always accompanies the revelation of truth. At least that is the case in the creative universe of the West Indian writer who likes to provide a telling anecdote about her own arrival to writing. For Maryse Condé traces her decision to become a writer to the time when she was ten years old and saw her mother cry for the first time. The writer reports that as a precocious little girl, she had decided to impress her mother by composing a poem that celebrated her on the day of her birthday. After several weeks of intense writing, she stood in front of her entire family and declaimed for forty minutes what she describes as a detailed portrait of a woman who was both revered and feared by all. The young Maryse was both thrilled and terrified at the power of her own words: they extracted tears from the proud and impassive woman who had never cried in front of others, but also led her dismayed mother to lock herself up in her room for the remainder of the day. Her family's surprise, stupefaction, and disbelief combined with her own pride and

distress brought about for Condé the realization that truth is not always welcomed, even as she knew right then and there that she had found her calling in life.<sup>178</sup>

Every novel in Maryse Condé's large body of work echoes a similar desire to tell the truth and dislocate myths since this is the best way to honor the past and better apprehend the challenges of the present. Her writing seeks to deconstruct self-congratulatory stories that embellish bygone events, as this is what constitutes a respectful and ethical engagement with history. Much like the young Maryse's poetry called into question the myth of her mother as the perfect matriarch, her novels attack collective beliefs by staging a confrontation with grief. Mourning allows the writer to deconstruct false—but widely held—ideas and to convey how characters are profoundly transformed once they are confronted with truth. This honest encounter with a painful past—and its echoes in the present—constitutes a prerequisite for her character's liberation across all of Condé's oeuvre.

Death, as the natural trope for radical transformation, and mourning, as a narrative strategy for translating the powerful reaction that accompanies any serious attempt at deconstructing prevailing beliefs, constitute Condé's literary trademark. After all, like Coco—the main character in *La Vie Scélérate*—explains in the opening epigraph of this chapter, truth finds a way of parading itself naked in the streets after tearing through the shrouds intended to conceal its unpleasant

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<sup>178</sup> To see two instances where Condé describes her arrival to writing see Maryse Condé, *Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer*, Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1999 and "Instructions on How to Become a 'Caribbean Writer'" in *Maryse Condé: The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*. New York: Seagull, 2014.

nature. In the same manner, truth parades naked under Condé's pen, amidst the funeral veils that both conceal and reveal its emancipatory quality.

The number of Condé's works that invoke some form of bereavement is indeed remarkable. Starting with her first novel *Heremakhonon* (1976) to her most recent autobiographical text *La Vie sans fards* (2012), her writing initiates a confrontation with grief where characters are forced to face unpleasant truths and dismantle myths that have prevented an honest relationship to the past. Mourning plays a central role in the author's creative arsenal since nearly all her novels set in motion the character's encounter with a suppressed part of either a collective or a personal history that has limited their freedom. These encounters, albeit painful, become the catalysts for accessing a different vision of themselves and the world. Mourning dislocates narratives of victimhood, personal and collective, transforming characters and events. Her imagined men and women break away from a position of passivity to become active agents of their life. By the same token, the past is no longer the source of a tragic fate but rather an important background against which individual destinies are forged, without ever relinquishing individual freedom. Instead, mourning allows Condé's characters to have a new vision of their past.

Death and mourning have a prominent role in the Caribbean imagination. Due in part to the fragility of life within the world of Atlantic slavery, it became a companion to be reckoned with as African men and women faced the rigors of forced labor in the plantation. Death was feared, but paradoxically sought in many cases, since it provided the only possible escape in a world of daily torture and

savage punishment. Whether expressed as tragic destiny or as defiant choice, death traverses the creative universe of the region and defines many of its most important aesthetic projects. Edouard Glissant highlights this ambivalence towards death in *Le Discours Antillais* where he explains that:

Notre attitude face à la mort est à la fois de morbidité (nous sommes par exemple fascinés par les accidents de la route), de dérision (nous nous détournons souvent de la vacance de la mort par le rire) et d'une familière complicité (nous cherchons par là le pays d'avant, le pays perdu).<sup>179</sup>

This abnormal fascination with death, which became an essential component of the region's art, may be explained in part through its history.

In *The Reaper's Garden*, Vincent Brown sheds light on how death became the background against which daily life happened in the islands and describes the many ways it influenced its political idioms. Because slaves existed in what he describes as a liminal state, caught in between life and death, "final rites of passage and relations with the dead took on added significance, generating some of (its) most intense and significant political activity."<sup>180</sup> It is not surprising that death would then become a central theme of many of the region's foundational texts, almost as prelude to a reordering of the world.

Much has been written about Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) and Jacques Roumain's *Les Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944) use of death. Michael Dash, for instance, describes these foundational texts as proposing a "fiction

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<sup>179</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais*, 218.

<sup>180</sup> Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2008, 58-59.



of the Caribbean as primal space where Adamic man can begin again.”<sup>181</sup> Death in this case is the prelude to a new and better life, that is, a reorganizing of the cosmos. For other critics, like Mireille Rosello, this morbidity in the region’s works is but a sign of a dysfunction linked to an identity crisis.<sup>182</sup> Questions of identity do appear in Condé’s works, but this aspect alone cannot account for the many narratives weaved around death. The beautifully crafted paragraphs describing bloody events, the vivid corpses inhabiting her writing, and her character’s continued confrontation with grief point towards something else. Her use of mourning goes beyond a character’s desire to unveil a haunting and evasive genealogy.<sup>183</sup>

This chapter will show that Condé creates characters who must confront mourning to bring about a new way of looking at the past. Rather than being an effort to restore what was lost or missing, mourning in *Traversée de la mangrove*, *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, and *Moi Tituba sorcière...noire de Salem* deconstructs a series of myths that had emerged in the absence of a known history and genealogy. These myths had placed characters into collective positions of victimhood and thus limited their individual freedom. Confronted with grief, characters are forced to question these positions of victimhood and the narratives that undergird them, to realize they were built upon a series of false ideas. Mourning thus becomes a

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<sup>181</sup> Michael Dash, *The Other America*, 83.

<sup>182</sup> Mireille Rosello, *La Littérature et identité creole aux Antilles*, Karthala, Paris, 1992.

<sup>183</sup> Dawn Fulton addresses this obsession for what she calls “Imperfect Genealogies” in the chapter devoted to *Traversée de la mangrove* and *La Migration des coeurs* in *Signs of Dissent*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2008.

process of questioning and transformation that liberates the individual from the collective.

Morbidity, derision and complicity do in fact color the way Condé's characters relate to death making it a disturbing, hard to seize, presence. The abnormal and unhealthy interest some of them show in the end of life drama is remarkable. For instance, Dido, Rosélie's maid and confidante in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, is described as inaugurating each day with a scrumptious reading from the crime report of the local newspaper; a daily activity that not only energizes her, but also foreshadows the drama unto which Rosélie's life will be propelled after details surrounding the murder of her husband Stephen become widely known.

Dans un bruit de papier froissé, elle déplia et parcourut minutieusement, page par page *la Tribune du Cap*, se pouléchant les lèvres, se récriant de façon gourmande quand le récit d'un crime était par trop succulent sans cesser de siroter le breuvage qu'elle coulait « sang de taureau »... (e)lle était parée pour la journée, ragaillardie par le café et la pitance des d'horreurs avalés.<sup>184</sup>

[In a rustle of paper she opened the *Cape Tribune* and went through it page by page, licking her lips, exclaiming greedily whenever a crime was much too juicy, while sipping her brew of "bull's blood" ... (s)he was now ready for the day, cheered up by the coffee and her fill of horrors.]

Violent murder is as a form of daily sustenance. Horrendous stories thus become flavorful nourishment that elicits anticipation and delight. This explains why Dido appears licking her lips and crying out avidly as she consumes, almost literally, the graphic crimes printed on the daily paper. Death, particularly when it takes a brutal form, is a prelude for taking apart lies, an experience that proves very rewarding not

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<sup>184</sup> Maryse Condé, *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 17. *Story of the Cannibal Woman*, 6.

just for the characters, but as it will become clear throughout the chapter, for Condé as well.

Death throughout Maryse Condé's oeuvre is seldom treated with the solemnity and respect found in texts by the *Négritude* writers. Derision, if not outright mockery, colors the way her characters pass into the next life. Sancher in *Traversée de la mangrove* is found dead with "la face enfouie dans la boue grasse, les vêtements souillés" and Rose, Rosélie's mother in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, meets her end as she sings the dramatic tango *Adios, Pampas Mias* only to be buried in a customized coffin—measuring four by four meters—in order to make room for her gargantuan body.<sup>185</sup> Whereas *Indigénisme* and *Négritude* engage with death by returning to the tropical landscape of the island to survey the colonial wound, resist European assimilation, and revalorize the African elements of their makeup, Condé— as it will be shown ahead—ridicules the possibility of such a return and undercuts mythological glorifications of a French West Indian identity.

If the generation before her uses death to proclaim their uniqueness and demand a form of cultural authenticity that reflects this condition, she derides their claims of exceptionalism. Suffering did have an interiorizing faculty and produced new forms of beauty for the *Négritude* writers who sought their inspiration in

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<sup>185</sup> *Traversée de la mangrove*, 14. *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 16: "Peu à peu, son précieux organe s'était réduit à un couinement de souris qui fusait, incongru, pathétique, de sa gorge... sa voix s'était définitivement éteinte sur un couac comme elle entonnait *Adios, pampas mias*. Elle avait été clouée pendant seize ans dans un fauteuil d'invalides, vingt-trois ans dans un lit dont ses chairs débordaient, aussi incontrôlables que les eaux d'un fleuve en crue... Roro Désir... lui avait confectionné un cercueil de quatre mètres sur quatre."

mother Africa. But their orphic exploration of pain and hatred, combined with the revalorization of the lost African roots, positioned the poet as a clairvoyant prophet and black poetry as a path to collective liberation. Condé refuses this position of authority where the writer speaks in the name of his people and becomes the voice for his community. While there is no question that Aimé Césaire's *prise de conscience* would prove instrumental to all the writing produced in the Caribbean—including Condé's—in her creative universe, we are very far from tragic heroes. Furthermore, she rejects the notion of a racial community based on suffering because this idea obscures the real problems at play through a vain and sentimental trap.<sup>186</sup> Her characters do not take a mythical form, and more importantly, do not live out in solitude and isolation the grandiose task of redefining for the collectivity what it means to be the child of slaves in the former Caribbean colonies.

Even if Maryse Condé shares with the writers of *Créolité* a belief in the creative potential of mourning, their aesthetic preoccupations and larger objectives for invoking death are radically different. Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique* (1988) and Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989) have a similar structure and theme. Both novels start with the mysterious death of a man whose disappearance brings together a community of disparate characters to mourn as they attempt to answer

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<sup>186</sup> Maryse Condé, "Négritude Césairienne, Négritude Senghorienne," *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1974, 410-419. "Pour nous, elle (négritude) est un piège sentimental et vain. Prenant pour base une illusoire communauté 'raciale' fondée sur un héritage de souffrances, elle oblitère les véritables problèmes qui ont toujours été de nature politique, sociale et économique. Nous ne sommes ni une race de sous-hommes, ni de martyres. Nous n'avons pas subi passivement un destin odieux. Nous avons contribué à le forger par la cupidité, l'égoïsme et l'aveuglement de nos dirigeants et le peu de souci que nous avons de nos masses."

three basic questions: Who were those men? How and why did they die? The answers to these questions—and the impossibility of an answer in Condé’s case—reflect the author’s relationship to writing and ideas of community.

Solibo’s death makes possible the transition into a new form of storytelling: he represents the allegorical death of a Martinican oral tradition in Creole, and his mourning by the community makes possible Chamoiseau’s linguistic experimentation with diglossia (as well as the narrative *mise en pratique* of his theorization of *Créolité*).<sup>187</sup> Sancher’s death and mourning in *Traversée de la mangrove* on the other hand, conveys the failure of community and articulates the absolute loneliness of those living in Rivière au sel, the fictional town where the novel takes place. Despite their coming together during the wake, the nineteen characters do not communicate with each other, and in their monologues, which make up the entirety of the novel, they express an experience of solitude. Death and mourning allow Condé to counter the myth of the Creole community as it was erected in *Eloge de la créolité*.

Maryse Condé objects to the idea of an “authentic Creole culture.” This radical opposition to Chamoiseau’s idea of the French Caribbean is based on her conviction that any attempt towards a collective definition encloses and imprisons

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<sup>187</sup> Rose-Myriam Réjouis, *Veillées pour les mots*. Paris: Karthala, 2004. 79: “Patrick Chamoiseau se tourne vers l’expérience du deuil collectif qu’il conçoit comme une période de transition et d’adaptation. Dans le deuil, qui suit la mort du héros (le conteur), naît un nouveau héros (l’ethnographe-écrivain)... Ce nouveau héros.. offre non pas un corps martyrisé, mais un imaginaire ludique et une langue ‘chamoisée’ qui transforme l’aliénation d’un vécu bilingue en un jeu interlinguistique. »

French West Indian writing within the borders of the islands.<sup>188</sup> In several critical articles she suggests that the literary manifesto, which later becomes a small—but extremely vocal—movement, does not offer anything new except yet another set of rigid theoretical formulas for writers.<sup>189</sup> She accuses the writers of *Eloge de la Créolité* of using their success and its concomitant authority to demarcate in too narrow terms the field of West Indian literature.<sup>190</sup> When Bernabé, Confiant and Chamoiseau praise Césaire for his role in making possible a new form of writing—one that ceases to be mimetic of European models—and call themselves his heirs by proclaiming that “(i)t was Césaire’s *Négritude* that opened to us the path for the actuality of a Caribbeanness which from then on could be postulated, and which itself is leading to another degree of authenticity,” they claim to be the sole representatives of an authentic Creole culture and literature. Maryse Condé disagrees with this claim since not only do they circumscribe their experience exclusively to the Caribbean, but they also petrify their cultural identity into a concept: Creoleness.<sup>191</sup>

Raphael Lucas echoes Condé’s complaint when articulates his objection to the movement’s goals and argues that *Créolité* adopts a messianic role that

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<sup>188</sup> Jean Bernabé, Raphael Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau published in

<sup>189</sup> Maryse Condé expresses her distaste for the theoretical and constrictive bent of Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé in several publications

<sup>190</sup> Maryse Condé, “Liaison Dangereuse” *Pour une littérature monde*, 212. “À quelque temps de là, en 1989, les écrivains de la Créolité publièrent leur *Eloge*. Investis de l’autorité que confère le succès, ils délimitèrent étroitement le champ de la littérature antillaise.”

<sup>191</sup> Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, *In Praise of Creoleness*, Paris: Gallimard, 1987, 80.

discredits the writers who came before them, as well as those who do not submit to their ideas:

*L'Éloge* prétend régenter l'inspiration, imposer les choix esthétiques, redéfinir l'identité caribéenne, décerner les labels de littéralité, désaliéner la conscience antillaise... on assiste à un certain messianisme littéraire, dans la mesure où les théoriciens porteurs du nouvel évangile libérateur semblent arriver comme une trinité de messies révélateurs et fondateurs, car avant eux il n'y a eu que de la *pré-littérature et des anté-créoles*.<sup>192</sup>

If Caribbean writers continue to grapple with the ghosts of history by searching for certainty and self-validation in an ancestral lost homeland—like Africa—or in an authentic, unique and autochthonous culture—like *Créolité*—it is because the wound of that history, that is, the wound of colonization and slavery in the Americas, continues to bleed in the present. *Négritude* traveled to Africa to find its roots, *Créolité* sought to proclaim an authentic Creole culture deeply anchored in the Antilles. Maryse Condé systematically rejects certainties and refuses to submit to any literary strategy that would artificially bolster a sense of collective identity. She attacks the over-theorization of literature in the West Indies where “literature seems to exist to provide the reader with a few reassuring images of himself and his land” and adamantly opposes what she calls “the tedious enumeration of the elements of popular culture”.<sup>193</sup> For Condé, the theoretical policing of West Indian literature robs the writers of her freedom and creativity.

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<sup>192</sup> Raphael Lucas, “L’Aventure Ambigue d’une certaine Créolité,” *Palabres* 2.3, 1999. 9-29.

<sup>193</sup> Maryse Condé, “Order Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer,” *Yale French Studies*, No 83., Post-Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations and Nomadism, Volume 2, 1993. 121-135.

Instead, Condé insists on staying within the wound, in all its grotesque horror, not to keep dwelling in the past but to exorcise how this past has transformed into and persisted in the present. Her oeuvre converses with a politically charged literary history, challenges head-on the foundational movements of the region—*Indigénisme*, *Négritude*, *Créolité*— and addresses Glissant's accurate assertion that in the Caribbean

Le passé, notre passé subi, qui n'est pas encore histoire pour nous, est pourtant là (ici) qui nous lancine. La tâche de l'écrivain est d'explorer ce lancinement, de le « révéler » de manière continue dans la présent et l'actuel. Cette exploration ne revient donc ni à une mise en schémas ni à un pleur nostalgique. C'est à démêler un sens douloureux du temps et à le projeter à tout coups dans notre futur... *une vision prophétique du passé*.<sup>194</sup>

Maryse Condé opens unhealed wounds, not for the sake of denouncing old wrongs or to lament postcolonial legacies, but rather to initiate an ethical relationship to the present. For the writer, this scrutiny—albeit painful—is the only path to freedom. Mourning, as we will see in this chapter, becomes, in fact, the only path for personal liberation for a series of characters who are required to confront grief before they can be released from predetermined models of being.

To better grasp how condéan mourning is inextricably bound to the writer's commitment to liberty, we will look at Tituba's, Rosélie's and the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel's experience of bereavement. When Tituba mourns a succession of failed love affairs in *Moi Tituba sorcière*, when Rosélie comes to grip with the loss of Stephen in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, and when those living in the mythical

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<sup>194</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997. 226-227.



town of Rivière au sel make peace with the disappearance of Francis Sancher in *Traversée de la mangrove*, they uncover the lies upon which they had built their lives. Mourning thus inaugurates a confrontation with truth that alters the course of their lives, and ultimately liberates the characters. Whereas death traditionally marks the end of life, in Condé's novels it actually ushers a more authentic life. It would seem as if individual emancipation is contingent upon mourning societal demands.

This chapter will show how mourning constitutes the writer's strategy to disengage from politically correct interpretations, narratives that prove constraining not just for the individual characters of her novels, but also for the writer in her literary craft. Not only does mourning allow the writer to destroy myths, as a closer look at bereavement in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003) illustrates, but the pain it produces has the ability to transform wounds into possibility. *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989) epitomizes how an honest encounter with grief reorganizes individual's lives. Once characters gather the strength to face their truth, which irrevocably brings about some form of grief, their suffering becomes the very source of their transformation. It is this transfiguration of pain that Condé goes after in her exploration of mourning. The novel *Moi Tituba... sorcière noire de Salem* (1986) performs a return to a painful past, the Atlantic slave trade in all its atrocities, not only to voice the silences of history, as Condé scholars have extensively noted, but also to build a more ethical relationship to the ways the past has not yet become history for those living in the West Indies, as Glissant's

earlier remark suggests. For in this new relationship lies the path to real freedom, both as a subject and as a writer.

### 3.1 Theories of Mourning

Mourning in Maryse's Condé's novels illustrates the writer's creative and ethical engagement with the past. Far from being the pathological expression of loss as Sigmund Freud, Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török theorized it, unresolved and ongoing mourning—a pivotal theme in Condé's large body of work—constitutes a respectful encounter with the dead and addresses their continued presence among the living. Bereavement in most of her novels but in particular *Moi, Tituba sorcière...* (1986), *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003) and *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989) amounts to what Jacques Derrida called an "incorporation" of the dead, a mourning that respectfully borrows from the dead, all the while the agency of the mourner does not erase the "otherness" of the departed.<sup>195</sup> By admitting that the dead are part of us, all the while honoring their utter otherness, the writer responds to the responsibility of their death by borrowing their voice without usurping their memory and legacy.

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<sup>195</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993) 14-15. « Si je m'apprête à parler longuement de fantômes, d'héritage et de générations, de générations de fantômes, c'est-à-dire de certains autres qui ne sont pas présents, ni présentement vivants, ni à nous ni en nous ni hors de nous, c'est au nom de la *justice*. De la justice là où elle n'est pas encore, pas encore là, là où elle ne sera jamais, pas plus que la loi, réductible au droit. Il faut parler *du* fantôme, voir *au* fantôme, et *avec* lui, dès lors qu'aucune éthique, aucune politique, révolutionnaire ou non, ne paraît possible et pensable et *juste* qui ne reconnaisse à son principe le respect pour les autres qui ne sont plus ou pour ces autres qui ne sont pas encore *là, présentement vivants*, qu'ils soient déjà morts ou qu'ils ne soient pas encore nés. »

Condé is not claiming to speak for the dead, but renders their presence in her texts—gives them a voice—to question the myths built around their disappearances. By so doing, she confronts her readers with what they have come to accept as true. Mourning thus responds to an ethical call as Judith Butler has proposed, but more importantly it marks the subject's arrival and consent to transformation.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, this chapter will show that Condé's continued use of mourning has to do with a break with a way of looking at the past, a painful demythologizing, that functions as the prelude for a series of individual transformations. The collective suffering described by the previous generation of writers (belonging to *Indigénisme*, *Négritude* and *Créolité*) is reconfigured to affirm the individual's will to freedom. Only under such an approach, where the writer has ceased to speak for the community and limits herself to articulating an individual point of view, can an environment propitious to freedom be possible.

As we have suggested, Maryse Condé's work not only breaks away from the *Négritude* political and aesthetic positions of Aimé Césaire and his followers, but also refuses the *Créoliste* aesthetic dictums. She aspires to a world literature in French that no longer feels constrained by geography, history and the responsibility towards representing the political goals of a nation. By so doing, Condé pursues

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<sup>196</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso, 2004. 22. Butler argues that the prolonged engagement with a painful loss has the potential of creating a state of not knowing, vulnerability, and precariousness: "When we lose certain people, or when we are disposed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed something that delineates the ties we have to others, that how us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us."

entrance into what Pascal Casanova described as the depoliticized and denationalized space of literature or *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. Admittance into this select group of writers, particularly in the case of writers from the so-called periphery or Global South, is contingent upon successfully maneuvering complex strategies of assimilation or differentiation.<sup>197</sup> Mourning constitutes one of Condé's key strategies for sidestepping such an alternative. It gives her a way to break free of the overriding tendency to affirm a French Caribbean difference that had locked its writing into a condition of isolation, and at the same time, mourning prevents her writing from completely divorcing from the crimes of the past, events that pertain to more than just one nation. In this way, Condé is free to dialogue with a universal and global culture.

### 3.1.1 Freud's Melancholia

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<sup>197</sup> These two strategies to secure literary capital on the global stage were discussed at length at the opening of the first chapter "Dislocating from the Global South." It was argued that writers from the periphery or the Global South had the option to assimilate, and thus dilute their difference, to be admitted into the rubric of World Literature or to differentiate, and thus be enclosed into the limited possibilities of representation accorded to their local literatures. Pascale Casanova, *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. Paris: Seuil, 1999. 242-246. "Tous les espaces littéraires, y compris l'espace français, ont été dominés, à un moment ou à un autre de leur histoire. L'univers littéraire international s'est construit dans et à travers les luttes des divers protagonistes qui cherchaient à entrer dans le jeu... Pour accéder à la simple existence littéraire, pour lutter contre cette invisibilité qui les menace d'emblée, les écrivains ont à créer les conditions de leur 'apparition', c'est-à-dire de leur visibilité littéraire...Les deux grandes familles de stratégies, fondatrices de toute les luttes à l'intérieur des espaces littéraires nationaux, sont d'une part l'assimilation, c'est-à-dire l'intégration, par une dilution ou un effacement de toute différence originelle, dans un espace littéraire dominant, et d'autre part la dissimulation ou différenciation, c'est-à-dire l'affirmation d'une différence à partir notamment d'une revendication nationale. »

In “Mourning and Melancholia” Sigmund Freud defines grief work in terms of object relations, as a profound wound, and the “reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one,” which produces a general loss of interest in the outside world.<sup>198</sup> During the time-consuming work of mourning, he argues, after the ego has been confronted with the reality that the loved object no longer exists, psychic energy is turned inward to recreate and remember the lost person, which explains the lack of interest in the outside world for the mourner. Because the ego insists on holding on to the loved object and the demand to withdraw from this attachment is met with opposition, there is a general turning away from reality. Mourning will continue until the ego is able to liberate himself from this object attachment, and, more importantly, mourning is not successfully resolved until the ego is able “to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live”.<sup>199</sup> Here is important to note that the main objective of mourning work, according to Freud, then, in order to avoid pathology, is to arrive at a categorical acceptance of the loss of the object and at the severance of all emotional ties with the lost object. In other words, the dead ought to remain dead after mourning. They must disappear from the psyche.

This goal of forgetting the dead is further problematized by Abraham and Török who, following Freud’s theorization of mourning and borrowing from Sandor Ferenczi, sought to expand and revise the concept of grief work. By differentiating

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<sup>198</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 244.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid

between introjection (good mourning) and incorporation (bad mourning), they separate successful mourning from the pathologizing of grief. Incorporation—where the dead do not disappear in the psyche but rather continue to haunt the mourner—is not a desirable outcome in psychoanalytical terms since it introduces “all or part of a love object or a thing into one’s own body” and erects “a secret tomb inside the subject” where “the loss is buried alive in the crypt”, and the dead remain as haunting phantoms for the living.<sup>200</sup> This negative perception and theorization of the psychic afterlife of the dead would be deconstructed by Derrida who, not satisfied with the option of a complete disappearance of the dead, proposes the possibility of maintaining the voice of the dead while retaining their otherness.

This is precisely why Derrida finds it critical to rewrite Abraham and Torok’s notion of *incorporation* in mourning. By removing the pathological bent of this concept and instead creatively rendering the otherness of the departed that remains alive in and through the survivors, he avoids both the disappearance of the dead, and proposes instead the continuation of the voice of the lost other. Those who are gone, he argues, are not really gone, but remain living in all their distinctiveness and otherness in the psyche of those who remain:

We look at the dead, who have been reduced to images “in us,” and we are looked at by them, but there is no symmetry between the gazes. There is thus a “dissymmetry” that can be interiorized only by

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<sup>200</sup> Abraham, Nicolas, Maria Torok, and Nicholas T. (Nicholas Thomas) Rand. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 171. The writers refuse the dead to really ever exist: “More often than not the dead do not return to rejoin the living but rather to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences...It is a fact that the “phantom,” whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify...the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life.”

exceeding, fracturing, wounding, injuring, traumatizing the interiority that it inhabits or that welcomes it through hospitality, love or friendship". In other words, "Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same... the completely other, dead, living in me."<sup>201</sup>

This new view of mourning, that refuses to forget the dead to instead honor their place in us, illustrates the way the dead appear in Condé's novels. The dead retain their agency in so far as they continue to look at and to address the living from the grave—as Tituba and Francis Sancher do— even if they only survive in the psyche of the living.

This chapter will further argue that the use of mourning in Condé's novels corresponds to what the editors of *The Work of Mourning* claim was Derrida's attempt in writing about his friend's deaths where he sought "to bear witness... without giving in to some narcissistic 'we' or 'me', being willing to return to the troublesome aspects of the past without wanting to claim the 'last word' on it".<sup>202</sup> Condé and Derrida agree that there can be no closure when giving a voice to the dead since the question they force upon the living remains open, unsolvable, and, to that extent, it constitutes a rich space for exploration. This absence of closure becomes the arena in which the author gives free reign to her creativity *and* where her characters endeavor to attain individual freedom.

Just like for Derrida a successful mourning must let the dead speak in their own voice—and he achieves this in his Eulogies by quoting from his departed

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<sup>201</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 11.

<sup>202</sup> Derrida, Jacques, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas. *The Work of Mourning / Jacques Derrida ; Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2001, 9.

friend's texts and lets the dead to *literally* invade his writings—Condé grants her dead characters a voice from the afterlife. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, Sancher speaks from the grave through the nineteen characters who gather to mourn his death. Condé devises a polyphonic narrative where his voice lives within each character. Although he no longer has a body—which explains Condé's homonymic play of his name: "sans chair" (without flesh in English)—he refuses to be silenced by death. In the case of Tituba's voice, in *Moi Tituba Sorcière*, the witch's song, "La Chanson de Tituba" survives from one end of the island to the other, travels the landscape, and is heard on the lips of those who carry the tune. In the epilogue, well after her death, Tituba continues to speak in the first person singular (just as she did when alive) and explains that

Mon histoire véritable commence où celle-là (ma vie) finit et n'aura pas de fin....elle existe la chanson de Tituba! Je l'entends d'un bout à l'autre de l'île, de North Point à Silver Sands, de Bridgetown à Bottom Bay. Elle court la crête des mornes. Elle se balance au bout de la fleur de balisier. L'autre jour j'ai entendu un garçon de quatre ou cinq ans la fredonner...Hier c'était une femme fouillant ses haillons sur les roches de la rivière qui la murmurait... A tout instant je l'entends.<sup>203</sup>

Her voice defies death, untinged with lamentos, and celebrates Tituba not in the past but in the present and future.

Derrida makes the case for a rewritten incorporation, an interiorization as a form of celebration of the dead, rescuing it from the designation of pathology, as in the case of Freud, Torok and Abraham. Instead interioration becomes a way of honoring those who have departed. Derrida does not conceive such incorporation

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<sup>203</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 267.



as a naïve belief in the physical continuation of the dead, or as a metaphysical idea of their existence after death. Instead he insists on the greatness and weight of the life-giving memory of those who have gone before us. This way, a conversation with the dead, both within and beyond us, is understood not as pathology but as the continuation of their life, a sort of after-life, following their departure:

The movement of interiorization keeps within us the life, thought, body, voice, look or soul of the other, but in the form of those hypomnemata, memoranda, signs or symbols, images or mnemonic representations which are only lacunary fragments, detached and dispersed—only “parts” of the departed other. In turn they are parts of us, included “in us” in a *memory* which suddenly seems *greater* and *older* than us . . . sublimely greater than this other that the memory harbors and guards within it, but also greater with this other, greater than itself, inadequate to itself, pregnant with this other.<sup>204</sup>

This insistence on the potential life that lies ahead for those who mourn, encrypted in the memory of the dead, makes grief a particularly fertile terrain for a writer such as Condé. Because this view of mourning privileges the future over the past, it ceases to be a diatribe against historical events. It enlarges memory towards the future and offers an alternative reading of the present.

### 3.2 Shattering Myths

To rewrite the story of a presumed witch who lived in 17<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts, to survey the aftershocks of apartheid in South Africa, and to return to the Caribbean native land would seem to be taking an orientation towards the past. And yet, in *Moi, Tituba Sorcière, Histoire de la femme cannibale*, and *Traversée de la mangrove* Maryse Condé is looking forward. The space of mourning allows the

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<sup>204</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoire de Paul de Mann*, New York: Columbia Press, 1986, 37-38.

writer to engage with the past without being trapped in it. It represents a strategic location from where to launch the deconstruction of a series of myths, ideas that have taken for granted the existence of a community that cannot be questioned and therefore have foreclosed individual agency. Condé explores racial solidarity, racial reconciliation, and the cultural community of Antillean Créolité through the lens of grief, a territory that promises lucidity, transformation and freedom.

### 3.2.1 Mourning Betrayal: Racial Solidarity Comes Under Fire

When Maryse Condé's 1986's novel *Moi, Tituba Sorcière* was translated into English, Angela Davis called Tituba "the voice of a suppressed black feminist tradition".<sup>205</sup> While it is true that Condé gives voice to a black slave accused of witchcraft in Salem, and she resurrects a woman who had been relegated to silence in the historical record, probably because of the color of her skin, Condé's novel is not interested in celebrating racial solidarity. In fact, the opposite is true. Condé uses her eponymous heroine's unrelenting experience of loss and mourning to expose the fallacy of ideas of fraternity based on race. While the novel does address the violence of Atlantic slavery and the hypocrisy of American religious fanaticism during 17<sup>th</sup> century Salem witch trials in its treatment of slaves, it is also intent on highlighting the division at the heart of black communities. For Tituba's mourning goes well beyond aching for the death of her mother Abena at the hands of a white owner when she tried to defend herself from another instance of rape. It is more than voicing the pain of her condition as a slave. Tituba must also mourn her black

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<sup>205</sup> Angela Y. Davis. "Foreword". Maryse Condé, *I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, 1992.

lovers' treasons: John Indien's treachery and Christopher's betrayal; highlighting the lack of cooperation among the slaves for the former, and the outright collaboration between maroons and slave owners for the latter. Racial lines do not determine allegiances in Condé's text. Tituba is equally ostracized by the black community—in both Barbados and North America—as by the white people of Boston, paradoxically finding temporary shelter in the arms of a female prisoner and a Jewish merchant, both white. As Holly Collins has pointed out, Condé's oeuvre in general and *Moi Tituba* in particular constitute a "deconstruction and reexamination of ideas of race, as well as a (...) stepping-stone towards a creolizing conception of identity".<sup>206</sup>

Maryse Condé's 1986's novel, *Moi Tituba sorcière*, constitutes a forceful continuation of the writer's deconstruction of negritude poetics as well as an ironic look at western ideals of political correctness and feminism. As Dawn Fulton and other critics have pointed out, Condé's writing constitutes an elaborate critique on essentialisms and one-dimensional readings.<sup>207</sup> The writer strives to steer clear from common views and majority opinions, precisely in those matters that most perturb her "politically correct" readers and critics. In this novel's case: racial solidarity.

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<sup>206</sup> Holly Collins, "Towards a 'Brave New World': Tracing the Emergence of Creolization in Maryse Condé's Canonical Rewritings," *Women in French Studies* Volume 23, 2015, pp. 69-84.

<sup>207</sup> See Dawn Fulton, *Signs of Dissent*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008 and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage et Lydie Moudileno, *Maryse Condé une Nomade Inconvenante*. Paris: Karthala, 2002. 11 "Echapper au carcan de la pensée toute faite c'est encore, pour Maryse Condé l'inconvenante, marquer son refus des limites imposées...tout chez Condé s'inscrit sous le signe d'une revendication de la liberté de creation et le refus de se plier au consensus."

Whereas Condé's attitude and positioning are not new, since from the very beginning novels like *En attendant le Bonheur* (1976) and *Segou* (1984) scrutinize the obsession to return to Africa—the mythical homeland that looms in the background as a lost mother— and criticize the many ways the continent has been idealized beyond recognition by negritude writers, in *Moi Tituba* she targets the idea of racial solidarity. When Tituba finds the comfort of friendship and love, it is not among her fellow blacks in Barbados, or among the African slaves who had been transported to New England by their masters and share her same fate, but with Hester Prynne—a white female prisoner in Massachusetts— and with Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo—a persecuted Portuguese Jewish man. The latter restores Tituba's freedom; first buying her from the Massachusetts prison where she was on the brink of death and thus bringing her back to life in a sort of second birth, to finally granting her the freedom she had surrendered willingly when she made the decision to follow John Indien and to marry her way into servitude.

It is remarkable how black solidarity is not only questioned throughout the novel, but the great lengths Condé goes to bring to the foreground how and why betrayal permeated the life and relationships of black communities. Both in the way African kings sold their fellow men, women and children to European slave traders for profit, and, more incisively, in the manner she describes Maroons betraying and denouncing the plans of those slaves who risked their lives and sought freedom. The novel insists on the tacit agreement between Maroon societies and the white planters, a pact that ultimately costs Tituba her life. This is a topic that remains taboo among writers, and is rarely mentioned since the prevailing narrative is one

that celebrates their independence and bravery, disregarding the details of how Maroon societies in the West Indies achieved their semi-autonomous status through betrayal.<sup>208</sup>

Through a series of periods of mourning, Condé dislocates the narrative of racial solidarity. Tituba must mourn her mother, stepfather, lovers, friends, and unborn children in order to come to the realization that she is alone in the world and does not belong to any community. Undoing the myth of racial solidarity is in line with her larger project of destroying collective myths, but more importantly with the writer's commitment to the freedom of the individual. Once Tituba transcends the false beliefs that bind her to a group—be it the black community in Barbados or fellow slaves in New England— she experiences freedom for the first time. But as has been pointed out by many critics, “Tituba is not a figure that lends itself easily to hermeneutical mastery”, complicating any one-directional readings.<sup>209</sup> In order to elucidate how Maryse Condé targets the myth of racial solidarity, thus extending her disavowal of negritude poetics, Condé creates a character who remains a victim of the institution of slavery but is also a victim of the black community. For Tituba is ultimately alone and fighting on several fronts. Neither accepted by the white masters (Abigail, Betsey, and Elizabeth Parris) whom

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<sup>208</sup> For historical references on the agreements reached between planters and maroons see Barbara Klamon Kopytoff, “Colonial Treaty as Sacred Charter of the Jamaican Maroons,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 26. No. 1 (Winter, 1979), pp.45-64. Bernard A. Marshall, “Maronnage in Slave Plantation Societies: A Case Study of Dominica, 1785-1815,” *Caribbean Quarterly*. Vol. 54, No. 4, The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition: West Indian History (December 2008), pp. 103-110.

<sup>209</sup> Nicole Simek, *Eating Well, Reading Well Maryse Condé and the Ethics of Interpretation*. New York: Rodopi, 2008, 39.

she heals and cares for in the hope for a small modicum of friendship, nor appreciated by the black community who fears her presumed “witch” powers, Tituba remains alone. Interestingly, and strengthening the idea that solidarity is not based on racial terms, the very few and short-lived instances when Tituba finds companionship and friendship, it is with two white and unlikely friends: Hester in the Salem prison and the Portuguese Jew Benjamin Cohen d’Azevedo.

It is easy to understand why so many readers have taken Tituba’s one-dimensionally, missed Condé’s clues about the irony embedded into the character’s complexity, and understood the writer’s recovery of the black witch from Barbados as a straightforward denunciation of the European institution of slavery.<sup>210</sup> At the level of plot, it would not be inaccurate to suggest that Condé is writing a novel that condemns European slavery in the New World and the hypocrisy of New England 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans. After all, with Tituba Condé rectifies the historical silence surrounding the presumed witch whose innocence was never restored after the Salem Trials uncovered the falsity of the accusations.<sup>211</sup> By granting a voice to

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<sup>210</sup> Jane Moss, “Postmodernizing the Salem Witchcraze: Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*,” *Colby Quarterly* Volume 35, Issue 1 March 1999, 7. Moss admits that she fell into the ideological trap of reading into the novel what she herself as a feminist and postcolonial reader wanted to see. She writes: “I was not the only good feminist to hail the novel as a perfect example of how women writers challenge hegemonic discourse by unearthing lost heroines, subverting masculinist notions about the feminine, and valorizing women’s knowledge. Like many others who share my politically correct, theoretically informed views, I fell into a very clever trap, seduced by both Tituba and Maryse Condé. I ignored the obvious signs in the text and warnings by the author...”

<sup>211</sup> Maryse Conde, *Moi Tituba*, 186. “En mai 1693, le gouverneur Phips, après accord de Londres, déclara un pardon général et les portes des prisons s’ouvrirent devant les accusés de Salem. Les pères retrouvèrent les enfants, les maris leurs femmes, les

Tituba— a supposed witch of ambiguous origins who was briefly mentioned in the historical record of the Salem Witch Trials—Condé is satisfying the impulse to reconstruct history and allow the voiceless Tituba to finally have a say on what happened in Massachusetts in 1692. As put by Jane Moss, Tituba “fulfills the desire for a first-person narrative by a strong Third World woman.” In addition, Condé is piecing together Caribbean history in so far as by “letting Tituba speak and tell her story in her own words, Condé gives her a voice, restores her history and her identity, and allows her to acquire language and thus to participate in society.”<sup>212</sup>

As the title indicates, the novel offers a personal account—in the first person singular—of the experiences of a “black... witch of Salem” in the New World. When Tituba speaks, as it has been written extensively, she gives voice to the forgotten victims of the institution of slavery at the hands of white colonists in Barbados and New England. Tituba explains at length, and from the very beginning of her narrative, that much of her suffering stems from white brutality. She acknowledges that she is the product of an “act of hatred and contempt” and therefore cannot be divorced from the legacy of her violent origins.<sup>213</sup> The young Tituba is keenly aware

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mères leurs filles. Moi je ne retrouvai rien. Ce pardon ne changeait rien à l'affaire. Nul ne se souciait de mon sort.”

*I Tituba*, 119. [In May 1693 Governor Phips decreed a general pardon, after approval from London, and the prison gates opened for the accused witches of Salem. Fathers were reunited with their children husbands with their wives, and mothers with their children. I reunited with nobody. This pardon changed nothing as far as I was concerned. My fate passed unnoticed.”

<sup>212</sup>Elisabeth Mudimbé-Boyi “Giving a Voice to Tituba: The Death of the Author?”. *World Literature Today*, Vol. 67, No. 4, Focus on Maryse Condé (Autumn, 1993), pp.751-756.

<sup>213</sup> Maryse Condé, *Moi Tituba*, 13. “Abena, ma mère, un marin anglais la viola... C’est de cette agression que je suis née. De cet acte de haine et de mépris.” *I Tituba*, 3.

that she did not have her mother's love because she reminded her mother of the pain and humiliation at the hands of Tituba's biological father, an English sailor. She explains that

...je ne cessais de lui remettre à l'esprit le Blanc qui l'avait possédée sur le pont du *Christ the King*, au milieu du cercle de marins, voyeurs obscènes. Je lui rappelais à tout instant sa douleur et son humiliation.<sup>214</sup>

I never stopped reminding my mother of the white sailor who had raped her on the deck of *Christ the King*, while surrounded by a circle of obscene voyeurs. I constantly reminded her of the pain and humiliation.<sup>215</sup>

In addition to being a living testimony of the sexual violence that was commonplace under slavery, Tituba insists on the racial identity of those responsible for her mother and adoptive father's premature deaths. The repetition of "par un blanc" [because of a white man] stresses the source of much of her suffering and is significant to the extent that it is contrasted with her surprising choice to live among them. Tituba, on the one hand, recognizes that white racism is the culprit of much of her suffering, and yet chooses to live among its perpetrators, in a course of action that puts an end to her liberty. She wonders if this is not a form of madness and betrayal, in what amounts to a premonitory reflection:

Ma mère avait été violée *par un Blanc*. Elle avait été pendue à cause d'un *Blanc*... Mon père adoptif s'était suicidé à cause d'un *Blanc*. En dépit de tout cela, j'envisageais de recommencer à vivre parmi eux,

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[Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor... I was born from this act of aggression. From this act of hatred and contempt.]

<sup>214</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 18.

<sup>215</sup> *I Tituba*, 6.



dans leur sein, sous leur coupe...Est-ce que ce n'était pas folie ? Folie et trahison ?<sup>216</sup>

My mother had been *raped by a white man*. She had been hanged *because of a white man*... My adoptive father had committed suicide *because of a white man*. Despite all that, I was considering living among white men again, in the midst, under their domination...Wasn't it madness? Madness and betrayal?<sup>217</sup>

And she is right. Tituba, in uniting her life to that of John Indien's, is agreeing to become a slave to Susanna Endicott, her husband's master. As her property, Tituba is then sold to Samuel Parris and taken to Boston where she joins the small contingent of black unfortunates. By renouncing her solitude in the mountains of Barbados, that is, by entering a community motivated by love for John Indien, Tituba relinquishes her freedom. Her desire for kinship, more precisely human love, leads her straight into servitude.

Tituba chronicles how the black men and women in New England have to endure all the repressed hatred, rage, and sexual perversions of the self-denying community of American Puritans. In their obsession to chase away sin, and covered under the guise of extreme piety, the white inhabitants of Salem project unto their slaves the evil they harbor within. Tituba explains how the color of her skin functions as a sign of demonic presence, is used as proof that she was in alliance with the devil, and makes her the perfect scapegoat:

Ma couleur était signe de mon intimité avec le Malin... A Salem, cette conviction était partagée par tous. Il y avait deux ou trois serviteurs noirs dans les parages, échoués là je ne sais trop comment et tous, nous étions non pas simplement des maudits, mais des émissaires visibles de Satan. Aussi, l'on venait furtivement nous trouver pour

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<sup>216</sup> Maryse Condé, *Moi Tituba sorcière*, 37. (My emphasis)

<sup>217</sup> Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, 19. (My emphasis)

tenter d'assouvir d'inavouables désirs de vengeance, se libérer des haines et des rancœurs insoupçonnables et s'efforcer de faire mal par tous les moyens.<sup>218</sup>

My color was indicative of my close connection with Satan... In Salem such a conviction was shared by all. There were two or three black servants in the community, how they got there I have no idea, and all of us were not simply cursed, but visible messengers of Satan. So we were furtively approached to try and assuage unspeakable desires for revenge, to liberate unsuspecting hatred and bitterness, and to do evil by every means.<sup>219</sup>

A community who imposes extreme piety and rigorous morality based on religious convictions but sees no contradiction in abusing a racial minority proves a fruitful background against which the writer can launch a critique of American society that spans several centuries. For there are many indications that Condé's text is not securely anchored in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its recurring anachronistic references—such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the KKK, and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"—are intended to connect to present-day racism in the United States.<sup>220</sup>

Condé is interested in alluding to how racial hatred and the mistreatment of African Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is linked to its haunting past of slavery. This is evident when the United States is described as a

Vaste terre cruelle où les esprits n'enfantent que le mal! Bientôt, ils se couvriront le visage de cagoules pour mieux nous supplicier. Ils

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<sup>218</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 105.

<sup>219</sup> *I, Tituba*, 65.

<sup>220</sup> The inclusion of Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit* gives the reader a clue on the contemporariness of Condé's critique. Abel Meeropol's poem, which was turned to music and performed around the world, was inspired by a photo of the lynching that took place in Marion, Indiana on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

boucleront sur nos enfants la lourde porte des ghettos. Ils nous disputeront tous les droits...<sup>221</sup>

[A vast, cruel land where the spirits only beget evil! Soon they will be covering their faces with hoods to better torture us. They will lock up our children behind the heavy gates of the ghettos. They will deny us our rights...]<sup>222</sup>

Condé has confirmed the atemporal nature of Tituba and emphasized the modern-day relevance of her heroine in the interview included in the afterword of the English translation where she explained that: “writing Tituba was an opportunity to express my feelings about present-day America. I wanted to imply that in terms of narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, and racism little has changed since the days of the Puritans.”<sup>223</sup> The images of the KKK’s white hoods, combined with the anachronistic reference to the urban ghettos, which have imprisoned generation after generation of slave descendants in a perpetual cycle of poverty, allow the writer to bring to mind for the readers (much like it will be the case in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* in the context of South Africa) how the civil rights battle in the United States was only partially won. The closing scene in the novel—as Tituba is executed by hanging for her collaboration with the latest slave revolt in Barbados—is revealing and significant because in it Condé identifies Tituba as within a long line of victims, inextricably connected to those that inspired Abel Meeropol’s 1937 poem *Strange Fruit*. Tituba, speaking from an afterlife imagined by the author, describes her last moments as follows: “Je fus la dernière à être conduite à la potence. Autour de moi, d’étranges arbres se hérissaient d’étranges fruits.” [I was the last to be taken to the

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<sup>221</sup> Maryse Condé, *Moi Tituba*, 271.

<sup>222</sup> Maryse Condé, *I Tituba*, 177-178.

<sup>223</sup> Ann Armstrong Scarboro, “Afterword,” *I Tituba*, 203.

gallows. All around me strange trees were bristling with strange fruit.]<sup>224</sup> When she is punished for her association with the Maroons— the community who ultimately betrays her—Tituba is reminded of her former life in Salem and held responsible for a list of crimes she did not commit. As a black witch, she functions as the perfect scapegoat for all the repressed evil of the white communities in Barbados and Salem. And if Puritan American society is singled out—as the epigraph by John Harrington at the opening of the novel indicates—it is because Puritan values continue to guide the American national imagination.<sup>225</sup> After all, the New England puritans are an essential element of the American foundational fiction. Condé has successfully dislocated Tituba from the seventeenth century and placed her at the heart of a critique of 20<sup>th</sup> century racism.

Just like the white planters in Salem and Barbados fear and punish Tituba for her powers to heal and communicate with the dead—betraying their racism—, the black community distrusts her for her uncharacteristic independence and unusual ability to connect with the afterlife. The novel is not solely centered on white cruelty, but includes the many ways Tituba is ruthlessly rejected by blacks. It would seem as if once the critique of America has been performed, Condé's Tituba shifts the focus away from the brutality of whites and towards how the black community fails to provide her with a sense of home, casting her off and leaving her alone to face the world. Despite their shared experiences of pain in the plantation, the

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<sup>224</sup> Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba*, 263. I, Tituba,

<sup>225</sup> "Death is a porte whereby we pass to joye;/Lyfe is a lake that drowneth all in payne." John Harrington. The fact that in the French edition Condé felt the need to indicate who John Harrington was is telling, as in parentheses, the reader learns that he was a puritan poet of the XIV century.

moment she decides to give up her isolation in nature and rejoin the black community, she is greeted with rejection. To her shock and disappointment, she is not considered one of them and is viewed with both deference and apprehension.

Tituba describes the wall that separates them as follows:

A ma vue, tout ce monde sauta prestement dans l'herbe et s'agenouilla tandis qu'une demi-douzaine de paires d'yeux respectueuses et terrifiées se levaient vers moi. Je restai abasourdie. Quelles légendes s'étaient tissées autour de moi ? On semblait me craindre. Pourquoi ? Fille d'une pendue, recluse au bord d'une mare, n'aurait-on plutôt me plaindre ?... Penser que je faisais peur, moi qui ne sentais en moi que tendresse, que compassion!<sup>226</sup>

The minute they saw me, everybody jumped into the grass and knelt down, while a half dozen pairs of respectful, yet terrified eyes looked up at me. I was taken aback. What stories had they woven about me? Why did they seem to be afraid of me? I should have thought they would have felt sorry for me instead, me the daughter of a hanged woman and a recluse who lived alone on the edge of a pond... I was born to heal not to frighten.<sup>227</sup>

This fear is made greater by the fact that her solitary and introverted nature is taken as a sign of a superiority complex, or worse, a form of Fanonian alienation.<sup>228</sup> When Tituba refuses to participate in John Indien's drunken bacchanalia, as their white mistress Susanna Endicott lies on her deathbed, she faces the accusation of not being black enough. Her disinclination to fulfill the prescribed behavior of boisterous, unruly slaves is interpreted as her estrangement from a supposed "black nature". Condé details their exchange as follows:

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<sup>226</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 25-26

<sup>227</sup> *I Tituba*, 11-12

<sup>228</sup> The charges brought against Tituba by John Indien are a verbatim reference to Fanon's 1952 title: *Peau Noire Masques Blancs* where the Martinican psychoanalyst explores the collective trauma and alienation of the men and women of African origin who lived under French colonization and were part of the cultural assimilation that followed the

J'étais terrifiée, peu habituée à ces débordements bruyants et un peu écoeurée par cette promiscuité. John Indien me prit le bras:  
 – Ne fais pas cette tête-là, sinon mes amis diront que tu fais la fière. Ils diront que *ta peau est noire, mais que par-dessus tu portes masque blanc...* – Il ne s'agit pas de cela. Mais si quelqu'un entend votre raffut et vient voir ce qui se passé par ici?  
 Il rit: –Et qu'importe ? On s'attend à ce que les nègres se soulent et dansent et fassent ripaille dès que leurs maîtres ont tourné le dos. Jouons à la perfection notre rôle de nègres.<sup>229</sup>

[I was terrified, unused to such noisy outbursts, and a little disgusted by the promiscuity. John Indian took me by the arm. "Don't put on such a face, or my friends will think you're condescending. They'll say *your skin is black, but you're wearing a white mask* over it."  
 "It's not that," I whispered. "But what if someone hears all your noise and comes to see what's going on?"  
 "And so what?" he laughed. "They expect niggers to get drunk and dance and make merry once their masters have turned their backs. Let's play at being perfect niggers."<sup>230</sup>

Here Condé takes issue, through the use of irony, with the idea that skin color should inform and direct behavior. Whereas John Indien is happy to fulfill the expectations of whites—even if his words betray a mocking cynicism—Tituba finds this conduct repulsive. To this extent, John Indien's accusations and the assembly of slaves who regard her with respect and trepidation have some basis for seeing her as separate from them. Even after Tituba renounces her solitary life in the Barbados mountains where she had lived alone since the death of her mother, she cannot bring herself to participate in a community whose behavior corresponds to expectations founded on ideas of race. Through her actions, she reiterates her

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<sup>229</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 56. (My emphasis).

<sup>230</sup> *I Tituba*, 32. It is worth noting that it is John Indien who admits to wearing a mask when it comes to dealing with whites. To Tituba's critique of his docility and behavior as a puppet in their hands he responds: "Je porte un masque...(p)eint au couleurs qu'il désirent. Les yeux rouges et globuleux? 'Oui, maître!' La bouche lippue et violacée? 'Oui, maîtresse!' Le nez épaté comme un crapaud? 'A votre plaisir, messieurs-mesdames!' Et la derrière, je suis moi, libre, John Indien!" (*Moi, Tituba*, 118)

independence and thus affirms her individual freedom. If she is accused of being a witch for insisting of being her own self and rejecting the consensus, then she is a witch.<sup>231</sup>

As Condé stresses throughout the novel, Tituba herself also feels alienated from the assembly of slaves. Her mother's crime—attempting to defend herself from a second rape—led the young Tituba into the wilderness where she was initiated into “the upper spheres of knowledge.”<sup>232</sup> This knowledge, which is equally called “witchcraft” by the black and white communities, represents an awareness of her solitary path as well as the desire to help those in need. From the moment she witnesses her mother's execution and is forced to mourn the childhood she would never enjoy, Tituba makes the resolve to hold on to her individuality, become self-sufficient, and be of service of those around her when possible. And yet, for this choice, she is called a witch, a label she questions and rejects not understanding why her “gift”—that is her desire to be of help in a sea of suffering—would be perceived as threatening. When John Indien calls her a witch, she retorts in an interior monologue:

Qu'est-ce qu'une sorcière? Je m'apercevais que dans sa bouche, le mot était entaché d'opprobre. Comment? La faculté de communiquer avec les invisibles, de garder un lien constant avec les disparus, se soigner, de guérir n'est-elle pas une grâce supérieure de nature à inspirer respect, admiration et gratitude ? En conséquence, la sorcière, si on

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<sup>231</sup> A study on the different representations of the witch within the novel is in order. Condé offers at least three dimensions of the witch: how the white community in New England defines the witch, how the Maroons conceive her, and how Tituba herself attempts to define herself (a definition that is filled with contradiction).

<sup>232</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 23. “Man Yaya m’initia à une connaissance plus haute”. *I Tituba*, 10.

veut la nommer ainsi celle qui possède cette grâce, ne devrait-elle par être choyée et révérée au lieu d'être crainte ?<sup>233</sup>

What is a witch? I noticed that when he said the word, it was marked with disapproval. Why should that be? Why? Isn't the ability to communicate with the invisible world, to keep constant links with the dead, to care for others and heal, a superior gift of nature that inspires respect, admiration, and gratitude? Consequently, shouldn't the witch (if that's what the person who has this gift is to be called) be cherished and revered rather than feared and misunderstood.

In this respect, John Indien's accusation forebodes Tituba's fate in New England. It is interesting to note that white and black communities alike interpret Tituba's powers as witchcraft.

In New England, Tituba is called a witch for restoring the health of Elizabeth Parris and mitigating the harsh experience of Betsey and Abigail. She deploys her healing powers to rescue the mother from the grips of death aboard the ship that is taking them to North America and mobilizes her knowledge of songs, tales, and games to soften the hardships of the children's life in Boston. Seeing the innocence of their childhood violated (much like her own) and the way the young girls are forbidden access to the world of the imagination, Tituba takes charge to recreate the joys they have been denied. For this, she is viciously tortured, unjustly imprisoned and heartlessly left to rot in jail despite her innocence. Tituba fails to understand why her willingness to heal, correct, and console is perceived as wicked. She does not comprehend why "dans cette société, donne-t-on à la fonction de 'sorcière' une connotation malfaisante?" [...in *this* society does one give the function of

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<sup>233</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 33-34. *I Tituba*,



a witch an evil connotation?] Why would the witch be conceived as bad if, after all, she continues, “la ‘sorcière’ si nous devons employer ce mot, corrige, redresse, console, guérit...”[“The witch’, if we must use this word, rights wrongs, helps, consoles, heals...]<sup>234</sup> But white New Englanders are not alone in seeing her powers as evil for Tituba will confront the same attitude in her native Barbados, among her peers.

In Barbados as well, Tituba is forced to explain—also in vain—that her powers are reserved for doing good. She refuses to use her knowledge to harm others, much to the surprise of all those around her who mock her for her unwillingness to defend herself. When Christopher, the leader of the Maroons, demands that she procures him the power to become invisible to better fight the white planters, she decides it is time to return to her hut and resume her life in solitude. In this relative isolation, she can devote her energy to the healing ministry the knowledge of plants demands. She describes her daily and simple routine as follows:

Je me levais aux aurores, priais, descendais me baigner à la rivière Ormonde, mangeais sur le pouce, puis me consacrais à mes recherches et à mes soins... Je découvris comment soigner ces maladies. Je découvris aussi comment soigner le pian et cicatriser toutes ces blessures que les nôtres se font jour après jour. Je parvenais à refermer des chairs déchiquetées et violacées. A recoller des morceaux d’os et à rafistoler des membres.<sup>235</sup>

I got up at dawn, prayed, went down to bathe in the River Ormond, had a bite to eat, then spent my time on my explorations and healing... I discovered how to treat yaws and to heal those wounds the slaves

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<sup>234</sup> *Moi, Tituba*, 152. *I, Tituba*, 96.

<sup>235</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 240-241.

got day after day. I managed to mend open, festering wounds, to put pieces of bone back together again, and to tie up limbs.<sup>236</sup>

After all her attempts to join the community of men, both black and white in Barbados and New England, Tituba resigns to her life as an outcast in spite of her natural and selfless disposition towards helping others.

And yet Tituba's solitude is briefly interrupted by two unlikely—but extremely important—friendships that transcend and subvert the racial paradigm that has colored postcolonial criticism. As we will see, Condé includes these “unusual” friendships in the narrative to unsettle the black/white dichotomy inherited from 19<sup>th</sup> century thought; the racial optic that continues to shape the reading of a postcolonial condition in terms of good vs. evil, oppressor vs. victim, and master vs. slave, and more importantly for our discussion, in racial terms. With Hester Prynne, the white adulteress of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Condé mocks—as Carolyn Duffey puts it— “any pieties about colorful victims.”<sup>237</sup> On the one hand, Hester ceases to be the sorrowful, penitent woman who lives a long and resigned life—the way she was imagined by Hawthorne—to become instead an unapologetic feminist *avant-la-lettre* who commits suicide rather than stand trial at the hands of the town's male judges. On the other hand, she displays a misandry that does not exist in the original text. Through her voice, Condé is able to expound on the ways Tituba's love for men has shaped—tragically—the black

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<sup>236</sup> *I Tituba*, 156.8

<sup>237</sup> Carolyn Duffey. “Tituba and Hester in the Intertextual Jail Cell: New World Feminisms in Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... Noire de Salem*.” *Women in French Studies* 4.1 (1996): 100-110. Condé is having fun at parodying feminists who would want to read Hester as the sole heroine and be frustrated at Tituba's insistence on relying on men for her pleasure.

woman's life and, more importantly, allows her to portray the presumed witch from Barbados as a woman in full possession of her sexuality. This last part, as it will be explored in more detail ahead, challenges the narrative of the sexually exploited female slave.

In their intimate conversations within the confines of their shared jail cell, and in a scene bordering on the homoerotic, a colorblind solidarity is born. Victims—if one can really speak of victims in a world that refuses to enclose its characters within the boundaries of the term—are not limited to one racial group. In her “re-writing” of both Tituba and Hester's fate—to use Francoise Lionnet's term about the writer's literary re-appropriation of the Western Canon— Condé provides a radically different ending to each woman's story as a way to devise an unlikely solidarity between them.<sup>238</sup> By displacing Hester Prynne out of 1642 and locating her in a Massachusetts jail around 1692, in the company of Tituba, Condé disrupts the narrative of black victimhood as the exclusive concern of the novel. Within the walls of their cell, racial difference is obliterated and Hester and Tituba are equal victims of the values of Puritan society. Shared martyrdom as well as common innocence bind these two women into a relationship unlike any other Tituba has experienced, not even among the black community of female slaves. Tituba acknowledges their equal status in the following reflection: “Cette créature aussi bonne que belle, souffrait le martyre. C'était, cette fois encore, une victime que l'on

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<sup>238</sup> Francoise Lionnet, “Narrating the Americas: Transcolonial *Métissage* and Maryse Condé's *La Migration des Coeurs*.” *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture: Inter-American Literary Dialogues*. Ed. Monika Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. 65-87.

traitait en coupable!" [This woman, who was as good as she was beautiful, was suffering martyrdom. She was yet another case of a victim being branded guilty.]<sup>239</sup> It would seem as if the writer is suggesting that gender solidarity trumps the racial duality of postcoloniality. Notwithstanding, the black/white duality is challenged through another bond, through the relationship forged between Tituba and the man who gives her back her freedom.

With Benjamin Cohen Azevedo Condé continues to deconstruct the idea of racial solidarity. The white Jewish widower who buys her from prison—and thus rescues her—represents another way Tituba finds a sense of community with someone outside of her racial group. Of all the male lovers she encounters during her life, he is the first—and only one—capable of a generous and selfless act towards her: he pays for her passage back to Barbados after having returned her to freedom. It is significant that he is the sole white lover in her life, and this is not coincidental. When Condé allows for the existence of real, compassionate and generous love between a man and a woman, it is between the most unlikely of partners: a biracial couple in 17<sup>th</sup> century New England. While it is true that their relationship does begin with a power differential (after all, she starts as his property), their bond quickly develops into a mutual and selfless form of love. Tituba describes the birth of their reciprocal caring as the work of his defunct wife who pushed them together and weaved between them “un réseau de menues bontés,

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<sup>239</sup> *Moi, Tituba*, 155. *I, Tituba*, 98.

menus services, menues reconnaissances.”<sup>240</sup> Their shared experience of alienation, at the heart of an exclusionary and condemnatory Puritan society, becomes the basis of a partnership that transcends their race. Equally alone, unencumbered by society’s prejudices, they find a short-lived sense of family that bypasses ideas of race. Benjamin explains how his religion, a sign of his difference vis-à-vis the Puritan majority, welcomes Tituba and disregards her color, the outward sign that others use to exclude her: “Notre Dieu ne connaît ni race ni couleur. Tu peux, si tu le veux devenir une des nôtres et prier avec nous.”<sup>241</sup> Benjamin’s love and small Jewish community embrace Tituba like no other had in the past, not even her own. As we pointed out earlier, she remains vilified and feared among them, and is several times betrayed.

Betrayal constitutes a central theme in the novel. Tituba is not only accused of witchcraft by the white family whom she cared for with the utmost devotion, but she is also betrayed by her own black husband, who joins the ranks of the accusers. While she is deeply saddened upon realizing the true intentions of the children’s strange behavior and their mother’s reaction, something dies within her when she learns that John Indien had been a pivotal actor in the accusations and subsequent trials in Salem.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 194.

<sup>241</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 204.

<sup>242</sup> Tituba describes her disappointment to the family’s duplicity and rapid turning against her as follows:... »(j)e n’avais pas cessé d’être à la dévotion de maîtresse Parris et de Betsey. J’avais guetté leurs moindres éternuements, arrêté leurs premières quintes de toux...Or en un clin d’œil, tout cela était oublié et je devenais une ennemie...j’étais incapable de prendre des distances avec la douleur que je

Tituba attributes the white family's cruelty to the racial prejudice that was commonplace in New England and accepts their disloyalty as the logical outcome of her condition as a slave. However, she does not foresee being betrayed by her own people, much less by the man she continues to love and for whom she surrendered her freedom. Upon learning that her beloved John Indien was complicit in her tragedy, she relinquishes the last shred of hope to be part of a mortal, human family and accepts her loneliness. She realizes, in pain, that family, community and fellowship are not available to her. Her resigned reflection at the gates of the prison is significant for it highlights Tituba's loneliness.

J'appris par la rumeur de la prison que John Indien était au premier rang des accusateurs, qu'il accompagnait le fléau de Dieu des fillettes, criant de leurs cris, se contorsionnant de leurs contorsions et dénonçant plus haut et plus fort qu'elles...Est-ce-que je souffris d'entendre dire tout cela ? (...)les portes des prisons s'ouvrirent devant les accusés de Salem. Les pères retrouvèrent leurs enfants, les maris leurs femmes, les mères leurs filles. Moi, je ne retrouvai rien...Nul ne se souciait de mon sort.<sup>243</sup>

This conviction of her solitude is confirmed and fully cemented once she discovers that the Maroons, the utmost symbol of slave rebellion in the plantation and sole hope for liberty, are in reality traitors.

Condé's inclusion of their betrayal is even more significant because, as we have argued before, rarely in French literature have Maroon societies been represented in negative terms. Instead a mythologization of Maroons has prevailed,

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ressentais. Torturée, je remontai à ma chambre et me mis au lit avec ma solitude et mon chagrin." (*Moi Tituba*, 113)

<sup>243</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 186.

glossing over their inherent human complexity and faults, on the one hand, and obscuring the negotiations with white European slaveholders that allowed them to coexist, on the other.<sup>244</sup> This is not the way Condé imagines the Maroons that Tituba encounters in Barbados. These men—for they are largely men—are in league with the white planters, denouncing any subversive plans in return for their relative freedom, and ultimately responsible for Tituba's death. Betrayed by Christopher, the all-too-human and extremely ambitious Maroon leader who had demanded to be made invisible and thus invincible through the supposed witch's magical powers, Tituba is handed over to the white planters who punish her the way the New England Puritans had failed to do. Tituba is hanged for sorcery. It is important to highlight that while the white family's betrayal in Salem did not result in her death, the betrayal of her fellow black slaves in Barbados does.

Condé has set out to disprove, in the most politically inconvenient of ways, the myth of racial solidarity. Tituba's mourning of their betrayal (John Indien, the Maroons, the community at large) allows the writer to reveal the fallacy of this

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<sup>244</sup> This tendency goes hand in hand with the narrative over-simplifications surrounding the Saint-Domingue Revolution, which trace the independence spirit that gave birth to the new nation of Haiti as either the glorious efforts of the maroon leaders who were completely divorced from the French Revolution ideals, or as solely possible thanks to the European Enlightenment project that changed the course of history across the world. In other words, depicting the Haitian Revolution as a consequence of the French Republican ideals of equality (as put forward by the 1789 Revolution) or as driven by the rebellious tradition of black African slaves imported into the island from West Africa. For some historical references of how French Maroon communities negotiated and signed treaties with colonial administrators see M.L.E Moreau de Saint-Méry, "The Border Maroons of Saint-Domingue: Le Maniel" in Richard Price (Ed), *Maroon Societies Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, Third Edition, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996, 140.

myth. Through the character of Iphigène—a wink to the sacrificial heroine in Homer’s *Illiad*—Condé spells out her aversion of heroic myths, insists on the little relevance of race when it comes to survival, and unveils a historical detail that seldom appears in literature since it goes against the discourse which celebrates black legendary revolutionaries. Iphigène, in warning Tituba against putting her blind trust in the Maroons, reveals to her who they really are:

Tu ne sais pas ce que sont en réalité les Marrons. Il existe entre les maîtres et eux, un pacte tacite. S'ils veulent que ceux-ci les laissent jouir de leur précaire liberté, ils doivent dénoncer tous les préparatifs, toutes les tentatives de révolte dont ils ont vent dans l'île. Alors ils ont partout leurs espions.<sup>245</sup>

Through the use of mourning in *Moi Tituba*, by virtue of the exploration of the witch’s unremitting suffering at the hands of both the white and black communities, Condé has undermined the idea of racial solidarity. That being said, it is important to be clear and note that Condé is not claiming that race has ceased to matter. As her novels continue to mourn racial prejudice and discrimination, she is far from setting out to celebrate the arrival of a “post-racial” world. In fact, as the next section will show, Condé remains very critical of romanticizing and forgetting the past in an attempt to render it more palatable in the present. Mourning once again, allows the writer to assess past events critically, and thus, respectfully. In *Histoire de la femme cannibale* the unresolved grief of Rosélie after her husband’s sudden violent death give the writer the opportunity to explore another triumphant myth.

### 3.2.2 The Open Wound

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<sup>245</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 249.



*“Que faire du passé ? Quel cadavre encombrant ! Devons nous l’embaumer et, ainsi idéalisé, l’autoriser à gérer notre destin ? Devons nous l’enterrer, à la sauvette, comme un malpropre et l’oublier radicalement ? Devons-nous le métamorphoser ?*

The looming presence and macabre symbolism of Robben Island, the former prison turned museum and tourist attraction off the coast of Cape Town, not only opens Condé’s 2003’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale* but also functions as a constant beacon on the horizon that cautions—both protagonist and reader alike—against the temptation to embellish the past for present-day consumption. The novel reads as an incisive warning against a view of history that uses the symbolic weight of South Africa within the postcolonial imagination as a marker of victory over racism, injustice, and colonial brutality. Condé’s insistence on exploring Rosélie’s prolonged mourning suggests that for the writer exorcising the trauma of the past requires both engaging with pain and unearthing suffering, without the promise of an immediate healing.

Through the description of Rosélie’s grief, Condé uncovers a personal deception that symbolizes a larger fiction. The novel mixes the personal psychology of a grief-stricken widower, Rosélie, with the collective trauma of a nation not fully healed from the crimes of apartheid, in order to show the many ways individual bigotry defies political progress. The personal and the collective fuse to shatter a myth, a self-congratulatory narrative of racial reconciliation which claims that the country’s political institutions managed to transform a community of enemies into one of friends. Condé imagines a biracial couple—reminiscent of Tituba and Benjamin Cohen d’Azevedo— that represents a supposed victory over racism and

functions as an allegory of South Africa to expose the false narrative of racial reconciliation. For Rosélie and Stephen's union is founded on a lie.

A corpse that conceals but ultimately reveals its secrets while unleashing a process of self-discovery and grief for the widow undergirds the drama of Condé's 2003's novel *Histoire de la femme cannibale*. When Stephen, a white professor of Irish literature living in Cape Town South Africa, is violently murdered in the middle of the night, his unsuspecting West Indian partner is thrust into reliving their life together, unearthing the lies, betrayals, omitted truths that she had refused to see. Rosélie's grief process is ushered by a police investigation that ultimately exposes her husband's double life. Stephen was not only gay but was also having an affair with a young student who ultimately killed him. Condé uses Rosélie's mourning as a way into the life of post-apartheid South Africa where the exceedingly optimistic "official" narrative of racial reconciliation has sought to eclipse wounds that are far from healing. The personal and the collective are superimposed: the writer vivisects the myth of the happy mixed-race couple, a larger symbol for the supposed healed society, to show how much of the views that made apartheid possible continue to permeate people's minds.

Mixed-race couples bear the weight of a colonial history laden with plantation politics, gender inequality, and racist legacies. Female African slaves in the Atlantic were considered private property and were sexually available to their

white masters, who fathered many illegitimate children through rape.<sup>246</sup> These forced sexual encounters increased the number of slaves without challenging, but rather contributing, to the growth of the plantation economy.<sup>247</sup> Because children inherited their mother's condition of freedom or servitude, black women were readily available to white men, while white women's bodies were heavily guarded in order to protect the social ordering of the colony.

The emergence of a sizable free and colored community would challenge — as it was in fact the case in Saint-Domingue—the political and economic structuring of the colony in terms of race.<sup>248</sup> Not surprisingly, colonial legislation and European attitudes towards mixed unions mirrored the political and economic imperatives in order to preserve colonial dominance—adapting as conditions on the ground changed. During the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, there were no anti-miscegenation rules throughout the French empire, but as the number of free blacks

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<sup>246</sup> Ronald Hyam, *Empire and sexuality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990. 92-93. "the West Indies do seem to have been a kind of sexual paradise to young European men: it was almost customary for white men of every social rank...to sleep with black women. Coloured mistresses were kept openly, and the practice was integral to West Indian life..." (Hyam's argument is British colonial officers were reformed to avoid going the French way: proximity brings contempt...

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 157. Hyam references L.G. Binger, the first French colonial governor of the Ivory Coast, to illustrate the widespread occurrence of mixed race relations in French colonial outposts in Africa, and how much it was encouraged by officials by writing that "A temporary union with a well-chosen native woman was recommended...in 1902. It was defended as a necessary part of the French 'colonial moral code', as being as desirable for the health and hygiene, discipline and prestige of the French official as it was for his imperial authority and linguistic competence"

<sup>248</sup> The first sparks of the Saint-Domingue revolution were lit by Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, two wealthy free mulatto men who sought to secure the same rights as white planters. They were not interested in the full emancipation of the slaves or in independence from France, but in protecting their financial and political interests.

and mulattoes grew in its Caribbean colonies (as did their economic competition with white planters), there was a reversal of this relative tolerance towards white European unions to black Africans. In fact, the first version of the *Code Noir*, enacted by Louis XIV's 1685 edict, forced unmarried white masters who had fathered a child with a slave to marry her, and set her and her children free. Forty years later, in its 1724's revision, such marriages would be outlawed.<sup>249</sup> Napoleon responded to the loss of Saint-Domingue—France's most prized possession in the Americas—with a wave of new racist laws, including a ban on interracial marriage that undid the short-lived equality black men and women had won with the French Revolution.<sup>250</sup> Subtler forms of racism continued to shape life in the former colonies after emancipation and all the way through departmentalization in 1947, even though the ban on mixed race marriages was lifted in 1819.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Between 1794 and 1802, black and mulattoes living under the First French Republic enjoyed almost the same citizenship rights as whites. France sought to assuage the slave revolt in Saint Domingue by proclaiming the emancipation of slaves who would be willing to help French troops to put down the insurrection. Sonthonax proclaimed emancipation August 1793, a decree confirmed by the National French Assembly February 1794. Napoleon's First Empire did away with these civil privileges when the institution of slavery was reinstated in the colonies until the final emancipation of black slaves in 1848.

<sup>250</sup> Graham T. Nessler. *An Islandwide Struggle for Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 154.

<sup>251</sup> Nick Nesbitt. "Departmentalization and the Logic of Decolonization." *L'Esprit Créateur*. Vol.47, N.1, Spring 2007, 32-43. "The citizenship extended to the inhabitants of the *vieilles colonies* in 1848 had always been, and remained in 1945, partial and subaltern. While the rights of citizens in the metropolitan French Republic were assured by the direct accountability of its representatives in the electorate, this had never been the case in the colonies. Since 1854, it was instead the executive head of state (first Napoleon III, later the president of the Republic) who promulgate all laws in the colonies."

The legacy of slavery and the vestiges of colonial policies preserved racist attitudes while the supposed colorblind model of citizenship—based on republican universalism—denied the existence of any racial prejudice. Mixed marriages existed and functioned in a perverse and hypocritical cultural milieu of racism, which, on the one hand, overvalued whiteness and undervalued blackness while, on the other hand, denied the existence of any racial discrimination. Condé is intent on exposing this hypocrisy, this desire to eclipse the crimes of the past that suggest there are no consequences to history.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon questions the possibility of real love between a white man and a black woman, identifies the power dynamic that exists within these couples, and concludes that these relationships remain impossible until the perceived inferiority of blackness is overcome.<sup>252</sup> Much has been written about Fanon's harsh critique of Mayotte Capécia's psychic alienation and his mistaken conflation between author and main character in his reading of *Je Suis Martiniquaise*.<sup>253</sup> Following Fanon's lead, Capécia's text has served as the primary prism through which "politically correct critics" have looked at the dilemma for black Caribbean woman: to choose between submitting to a racialized identity

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<sup>252</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. 42: "Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections. Its perversions...authentic love will remain unattainable before one has purged oneself of that feeling of inferiority..."

<sup>253</sup> See James Arnold, « Frantz Fanon, Lafcadio Hearn et la supercherie de "Mayotte Capécia" », *Revue de littérature comparée* 2/2002 (n° 302), p. 148-166. Arnold discusses how literary scholars have unmasked *Je Suis martiniquaise* as an extreme case of systematic plagiarism conceived for a post-WWII reactionary readership. The text plagiarized Lafcadio Hearn's description of Martinique by the editor Edmond Buchet who sought to serve a European readership what it desired to see in the former colony.

defined in constrictive male terms (Négritude being defined by men and in male terms), or to affirm her gender autonomy, and thus perform what amounts to race betrayal in the eyes of her community. Condé alludes to this dilemma in an interview with Bénédicte Boisseron, when she complains that “(t)he black woman is the one who is being judged, first because she is seen as a traitor of her race, second because she is seen as her husband’s maid, inferior to him, and then she is always the guilty one.”<sup>254</sup> Condé refuses to take sides on what she perceives is a false debate aimed at policing women’s sexuality. A woman’s ethnic identity should not circumscribe and limit her choices in romantic partners in accordance to race, as this would entail a form of racial essentialization no different from the one Fanon denounces. Although the writer acknowledges and condemns the societal prejudices against mixed race couples—a position carrying forward the complicated colonial legacy outlined earlier—she describes mockingly those who want to overcome racial discrimination by excessively celebrating mixed marriages.

Both positions, according to the writer, oversignify race. This explains why Condé equally parodies the posture of Alice and Andy—the politically engaged African-American couple—who condescendingly pity Rosélie for being in a relationship with a white European, and the views of the mixed couples Rosélie and Stephen frequent socially in Cape Town.<sup>255</sup> The latter become the target of Condé’s

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<sup>254</sup> Bénédicte Boisseron, “Intimité; Entretien avec Maryse Condé”. *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, Vol. 13, N. 1, 2010. 151.

<sup>255</sup> Condé imagines Andy and Alice treating Rosélie with “un sombre apitoiment” [sober compassion] and viewing her as “l’illustration du complexe de lactification à la Mayotte Capécia » since « elle ne réclame rien, n’exige rien sinon un peu de blancheur dans sa vie”[a living example of Mayotte Capécia’s complex of

ironic descriptions where they emerge as overtly invested on the exceptional, progressive and enlightened character of their romantic arrangements. Their gathering is described as the coming together of a sanctimonious group of individuals whose self-worth knows no ends:

Le diner réunit uniquement des couples mixtes, hommes blancs, femmes noires, comme s'ils constituaient une humanité singulière qu'il ne fallait sous aucun prétexte confondre avec l'autre.<sup>256</sup>

[The dinner guests were made up solely of mixed couples, white men and black women, as if they constituted a humanity all their own that on no pretext should be mistaken for any other.]

In a Rabelaisian accumulation of grotesque typologies, Condé ridicules both the group and the individual's perceived exceptionality. Her recurring use of superlatives to describe each male attendee not only has a comic effect, but also sheds light on the writer's contempt towards those who boast moral superiority by using their partner's racial identity as evidence of their worthiness.<sup>257</sup> The whole scene closes with Stephen's sardonic commentary on the historical background of unions between black women and their white men in quest of exoticism, followed by the arrival of a drunken Arthur trailing with him a black prostitute found in Cape Town's red district, reminding the partygoers of the resilience of racial clichés,

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lactification...asking for nothing, demanding nothing, except a little whiteness in her life]. Their negative judgment of Rosélie betrays their own racism for assuming that her union to Stephen is solely motivated by her desire to be white, when there is nothing in her behavior to indicate this is the case.

<sup>256</sup> *Histoire*, 67. *Story*, 57.

<sup>257</sup> *Histoire*, 67. "Le plus sûr de lui était Antoine... Le plus beau était sans contredit Piotr...Le plus romantique était Peter...Le plus séduisant était Stephen... Le plus ordinaire était un Américain... La vedette fut ravie par Patrick" 67

particularly that of the hypersexualized black woman.<sup>258</sup> Condé's playful engagement with stereotypes in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, rejects—via Alice and Andy—Fanon's critique of Capécia as a race traitor hoping to add whiteness to her life, but also shows how the over valorization of mixed race couples engages in the same essentialist mentality they decry. Both positions perpetuate the idea that there is an essential and immutable "black" nature. If Fanon continues to haunt Condé's writing—as many critics have pointed it out—it is because she refuses the false choices given to black women.<sup>259</sup> While she agrees with him that race and a certain form of an inferiority complex continues to reproduce forms of coloniality in the present, she also remains wary of denying black women the autonomy to choose partners based on race.

Historians have identified the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, which banned interracial marriages and sexual relationships, as the first piece of

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<sup>258</sup> This is a theme recurrent throughout the novel. For instance, when the widow refuses a request for a date for fear of being accused of the promiscuity, her inner monologue plays out what she perceives would be her "all white" neighbor's judgment: "La femme noire, la femme orientale sont des machines, elles ne distinguent pas un homme de l'autre" *Histoire*, 45.

<sup>259</sup> Jeannie Suk. *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 90. For Suk, Maryse Condé returns to Fanon's Mayotte Capécia—who represents "an archetypal female race traitor"—in order to re-create and stress the distance that separates authorial and fictionalized selves, which preserves the critical distance she aims for in all her fiction. Marise-Denise Shelton, "Condé: The Politics of Gender and Identity." *World Literature Today*. Vol.67, No. 4, Focus on Maryse Condé (Autumn, 1993), pp. 717-722. For Shelton Condé "repudiates certain assumptions... (and)...questions the validity of theories that seek to define the Caribbean in terms of a basic antinomy: African against Europe."



apartheid legislation.<sup>260</sup> The country that instituted racial discrimination as its official policy in the middle of the twenty-first century—for nearly fifty years—would later require all South Africans to register as members of one of four racial groups (White, Black, Colored, Indian) in order to further segregate society.<sup>261</sup> With Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in 1990, and the 1994’s new constitution, South Africa became an icon of freedom and the transcendence of racial prejudice across the global imagination. By locating her 2003 novel in South Africa, Maryse Condé performs a return to Africa akin to those staged at the beginning of her career as a writer—*Heremakhonon* (1976) *Segou* (1984). This time, however, the writer is not driven by a desire to unveil the impossibility of a return to an original source to illustrate—loud and clear for all to see—the limits of Négritude poetics and aesthetics, but rather to show the resilience of prejudices despite political changes. By setting her novel in Cape Town, Condé unveils the open scars of Apartheid to shatter the myth of healed biracial society.

For Stephen, this city of the Global South represents the final victory over a history of discrimination and heralds a new “post-racial” world, a view he defends against evidence of the contrary. He admires South Africa’s trajectory and is adamant on witnessing, first-hand, how the uttermost example of institutionalized racism attempts to get past its history. He makes the case for moving to Cape Town by saying that

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<sup>260</sup> Patrick Furlong, *The Mixed Marriages Act: An Historical and Theological Study*. Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, 1983. 38

<sup>261</sup> The Population Registration Act of 1950.

Après sept ans à New York, connaître l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid...serait remonter en arrière. Remonter au temps où l'Amérique venait toute juste de museler ses chiens policiers et de terminer les combats pour les Droits civiques. Ils seraient aux premières loges pour observer comment des communautés autrefois ennemies apprenaient à s'entendre.<sup>262</sup>

[After seven years in New York, he argued, to see South Africa after apartheid would be like going back in time. Going back to when the United States had just finished muzzling its police dogs and the fight for civil rights was over. They would have a front-row seat to observe how communities, once bitter enemies, learn how to live together.]

His comparison of post-apartheid South Africa after the victory of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress in 1994 with the United States after the Civil Right's movement in the sixties is significant as these two moments mark—at least in the global imagination—the overcoming of racial oppression. This triumphalist and idealistic version of history overlooks the more pervasive and entrenched forms of discrimination that remain in place despite institutional reforms. Condé has Stephen's appraisal of Cape Town follow that of Rosélie in order to stress the distance between the experiences of an English man—echoing the official discourse packaged for international display—versus those of a black woman from the West Indies—who cannot escape being singled out for the color of her skin. Condé illustrates the distance between these two assessments via Rosélie's description of the city:

C'était cela, Le Cap! Cette hostilité des Blancs empoisonnant l'air comme un miasme. Cette impression d'un danger qui fondrait on ne sait d'où. Le pouvoir, là-bas à Pretoria, avait beau se gargariser de discours : devoir de pardon, nécessité de vivre ensemble, Vérité et

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<sup>262</sup> *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 45-46. *Story*, 35.

Réconciliation, il n'y avait dans ce bout de terre que des tensions, de la haine, le désir de vengeance!<sup>263</sup>

[That summed up Cape Town! That hostility of the whites which poisoned the air like a miasma. This feeling of danger which could sweep down from anywhere. However hard the authorities over there in Pretoria reveled in big speeches about the duty of forgiveness, the need to live together, Truth and Reconciliation, there was nothing but tension, hatred, and desire for revenge in this patch of land.]

While Stephen's view echoes the official policy, grounded on "big speeches" of forgiveness hoping to transcend the past, anesthetizing and thus banalizing the horrors committed for nearly fifty years, Rosélie's is centered on the concrete discriminatory treatment she, personally, receives in the streets in the present. Condé is intent on showing that white South African's attitudes did not change with the end of apartheid: Stephen's university colleagues—liberal academics who are supposed to be at the forefront of racial inclusivity—continue to mistake Rosélie for a house servant and their neighbors are outraged to share their exclusive address in rue Faure with a black woman. The latter's complaint underscores the continuity of the social stratification in Cape Town, an ordering in terms of race.

A cause d'elle, tout le quartier avait souffert la disgrâce. Imaginez une négresse à demeure rue Faure!...De mémoire d'homme, apartheid comme nouveau régime, les seuls Noirs qu'on ait jamais signalés de ce côté de la montagne de la Table étaient des domestiques.

[She had disgraced the whole neighborhood. Imagine a Negress living on Faure Street! (...) As far as they could remember, pre- or post-apartheid, the only blacks spotted this side to Table Mountain were domestics.]<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 91. *Story*, 80-81.

<sup>264</sup> *Histoire* 19. *Story*, 9.

Rosélie's mourning of Stephen allows Condé to explore this contradictory reality. A perspective that has been obscured by an official discourse on forgiveness that glosses over everyday reality.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, when collective apologies of past crimes—as it was the case in South Africa—are played out in the global international scene, they remain abortive rituals in so far as they, on the one hand, create a temporal marker that assumes that a new era has been launched, and, on the other hand, transpose what is ultimately an individual act unto a collective one.<sup>265</sup> Much like Trouillot, Condé does not believe that real, structural change has taken place just because an official apology has occurred in South Africa and, conversely, is intent on denouncing the way former perpetrators have been released from the moral responsibility to change their racist views. Her representation of the post-apartheid nation challenges the assumption that racial reconciliation has taken place.

Stephen's violent death, and Rosélie's subsequent mourning of her companion of twenty years, compels the woman to take a closer look at the nature of their relationship. During their life together, she had insisted on seeing their biracial couple through Stephen's poetic and fictional account, disregarding what she intuited was a façade. She describes this view of reality as a gratifying fabrication that could very well be part of a novel: "Elle se plaisait à revivre leur première rencontre à travers les propos de Stephen. Elle apparaissait alors poétique, fictionnelle...elle aurait pu constituer un chapitre de roman..." [She liked

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<sup>265</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Abortive Rituals: Historical Apologies in the Global Era," *Interventions* 2, July 2000. 171-186.

listening to the way Stephen relieved their first meeting. It became fictional and poetical, as if it were a chapter in a novel...]<sup>266</sup> But once he is no longer there to filter reality for her, Rosélie is thrust into seeing what she had insisted on ignoring:

Une vérité nauséabonde... pareille à un poupon emmaillotté dans des couches souillées... elle devait s'avouer qu'elle avait toujours su qui il était... elle avait choisi d'ignorer l'évidence... Elle avait refusé de payer le prix terrible de la lucidité.<sup>267</sup>

[A nauseous truth was lurking, like a baby swaddled in dirty diapers...she had to admit that she had always known who he was... She had simply chosen to ignore the evidence...She had refused to pay the price of lucidity.]

Upon closer inspection, Rosélie is led to acknowledge that his betrayal is coupled with the fact that they had never been equal partners in their life together: Stephen was an all-dominant father figure to her, guarding her like a child and thus infantilizing the grown woman under his protective shadow. They had met in a brothel where he was drawn to her for her vulnerability and the sense of superiority this gave him. The way he describes their first encounter is significant for it indicates the power dynamic—a larger commentary on mixed-race couples— that guided their relationship: “Tu avais l’air tellement perdue, tellement vulnérable” he explains to her highlighting how his impression of her afforded him, in turn, a feeling of peace and strength: “je me suis senti par comparaison” he admits “paisible et puissant. Dieu le Père.”<sup>268</sup> This godlike status translated into making him the decision maker in every aspect of their life together, which is how they came to

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<sup>266</sup> *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 29. *Story*, 18.

<sup>267</sup> *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 279. *Story*, 273.

<sup>268</sup> *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 30. We also learn that “elle ne partageait pas sa vie depuis trois mois qu’il commença à prendre des décisions

settle in Cape Town, South Africa, a place that would be defined in very different terms by them.

By choosing to locate the novel in an African country that experienced a difficult journey to desegregation and to include in the narrative Robben Island—the famous prison island where Nelson Mandela spent 18 of the 27 years for fighting apartheid—she is unearthing a history chapter that cannot be closed, critiquing the ways in which the site has been commercialized into a tourist destination, and more importantly, challenging a victorious discourse. Her aim is to call attention to the past, in all its ugliness, for all to see, as that is the only way to repair relationships in the present. The omniscient narrator in the novel makes this clear when she describes the main character looking into the distance (and symbolically into the past) and asks an important rhetorical question destined for the reader:

A travers la distance, Rosélie fixait le rougeolement de Robben Island qu'elle n'avait jamais visitée et qui n'en finissait pas de l'interpeller. Un bain devenu attraction touristique ! Ses lumières clignotaient dans le lointain comme le rappel du passé qui, têtu, ne se laissait pas aisément transfigurer. Que faire du passé ? Quel cadavre encombrant ! Devons-nous l'embaumer et, ainsi idéalisé, l'autoriser à gérer notre destin ? Devons-nous l'enterrer, à la sauvette, comme un malpropre et l'oublier radicalement ? Devons-nous le métamorphoser ?<sup>269</sup>

[In the distance Rosélie stared at the glow of Robben Island, which she had never visited and which was constantly calling her. A penal colony turned into a tourist attraction! Its lights winked in the distance, a reminder of a past that stubbornly refused to be transformed.

What do you do with the past? What a cumbersome corpse! Should we embalm it, idealize it, and let it take over our destiny? Or should we hurriedly bury it as a disgrace and forget it altogether? Should we metamorphose it?]

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<sup>269</sup> Condé, *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, 129. *Story of the Cannibal Woman*, 120-121.

Here, just as the lights of Robben Island are asking Rosélie to examine her past—an allegory for a larger history that remains repressed but refuses to be neatly sublimated—the reality of what happened in the island prison demands to be interrogated.

The past, which Condé compares to a corpse, defies transformation and demands to be considered. To be clear: Condé is suggesting that the past should remain unfurled, exposed in all its pain. And thus it is only by revealing these fault lines, symbolically expressed through the lie that Rosélie's interracial marriage to Stephen represents, that Condé describes her heroine as able to find her own creative voice in painting. Once the artist has accepted to grieve the loss of her white husband, the pain of his lies, she manages not only to conceive titles for her own works, which in the past had been named by her husband, but she also feels at home in a foreign land which she makes her own after an entire life of dislocation. Only within the mourning of her husband can Rosélie finally see the past of South Africa and confront the larger myth of racial reconciliation in which she had based her own life.

### **3.2.3 Breaking the Social Compact of Créolité**

*Traversée de la mangrove*, published the same year as *Eloge de la Créolité*, is a rebuttal to Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant's idyllic portrayal of the Antillean Creole community. Condé builds a polyphonic narrative in the first person singular where nineteen people claim special and unique knowledge of a mysterious outsider. Their different versions of Sancher both complete, and cast doubt on the

other accounts by revealing selective silences and adding omitted details. While it is true that Condé performs a return to the native land, as many critics have correctly pointed out, she does not do so to sing the praises of Créolité, but to critique it. Her return to Guadeloupe proves to be a necessary detour from her usual *nomadisme* and *errance* across the *Tout-Monde* to combat what she considers the “emergence of a new order, even more restrictive than the existing one” in West Indian Literature.<sup>270</sup> She questions the over-regimentation of writing by a select group of male theorists who in so doing are not only performing the folklorization of the region’s creative writing, but also further isolating it into an insularity of self-referential games.<sup>271</sup>

The novel reflects her mistrust of notions of cultural authenticity and mocks the false debate over language that has taken place in the Francophone Caribbean, which has pitted Creole against French.<sup>272</sup> In a metacritical gesture, her novel imagines Lucien Evariste, a writer who is rendered impotent in front of his typewriter because of the community’s ideological obsession with Creole. In this regard Lucien’s frustrated book is significant because it represents the imprisonment of literary creativity by the Creole ideology, just like the book he

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<sup>270</sup> Maryse Condé, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer” *Yale French Studies*, No. 83, Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations and Nomadisms, Vol. 2 (1993), 130.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. In addressing the constrictive nature of *Eloge* Condé writes: “The tedious enumeration of the elements of popular culture which is made in the first pages of the manifesto leaves very little freedom for creativity. Are we condemned *ad vitam aeternam* to speak of vegetable markets, story tellers, ‘dorlis,’ ‘koutem’ ...? Are we condemned to explore to saturation the resources of our narrow islands?”

<sup>272</sup> Also true in North Africa where writers felt required to choose between Arabic and French.



imagines *after* mourning Sancher illustrates the way out of his creative impasse. Indeed the novel can be read as a challenge of “the very possibility of representing the Caribbean multiplicity and diversity to which *créolité* lays claim.”<sup>273</sup> For Condé what matters most is not a community’s voice and collective identity as Creole, but rather the individual members who should not be bound by a predetermined mode of being set by some imagined—and false—social compact.

Maryse Condé returns to her native Guadeloupe in *Traversée de la Mangrove* to portray a divided community where entrenched ideas about race, gender, class and ethnic distinctions destroy its individual members. Rivière au Sel, a microcosm of Antillean society, appears as a cruel place where many of its inhabitants find themselves imprisoned in the stifling order—with troubling echoes of the plantation structure— that subjugates women, ethnic minorities, and all those who deviate from patriarchal rule. In the words of Moïse the postman, an outcast for his Chinese ancestry, “seul celui qui a vécu entre les quatre murs d’une petite communauté connaît sa méchanceté et sa peur de l’étranger” [Only he who has lived within the four walls of a small community knows its evilness and its fear of the outsider].<sup>274</sup> This maxim proves true for the imagined community Condé sets to deconstruct. Françoise Lionnet highlights that *Traversée de la mangrove* performs “un retour à la culture paysanne qui semble avoir le mieux gardé les traces d’un brassage culturel

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<sup>273</sup> Jeannie Suk, *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 155.

<sup>274</sup> Maryse Condé, *Traversée de la mangrove*, 39. (my translation)

unique” and initiates a new creative direction for Condé.<sup>275</sup> Whereas Lionnet suggests that Condé has returned to her homeland free of the irony and cautious distance of the past to give rise to a total rootedness and reflect in all honesty about Antillean specificity (and the possibility of a new humanism), her irony and critical detachment remain in full force throughout the text.<sup>276</sup> If, as Lionnet claims, Condé has returned home to reevaluate West Indian society and the bonds between its members she remains very pessimistic.<sup>277</sup>

Nowhere is the idea of “brassage culturel” lauded in the text. Instead, the reader is met with a series of characters who fear outsiders, perpetuate Guadeloupe’s colonial history through their entrenched social hierarchies, and whose rampant racism sees cultural mixing as an abhorrent flaw. This is true for Loulou Lameaulnes, the mixed-race patriarch who reveres his white male ancestor but discounts his black mother. In his exchange with Sancher, as he hypocritically pleads for him to marry Mira—his illegitimate daughter whose black mother he himself never married—, Loulou cynically suggests they both belong to the same superior camp and tries to establish an affinity with the man by claiming a common European heritage that sometimes dirtied itself with black and Indian races.

Dans les livres d’histoire, on appelle nos ancêtres les Découvreurs.  
D’accord, ils ont sali leur sang avec des Nègresses; dans ton cas je

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<sup>275</sup> Françoise Lionnet, “*Traversée de la Mangrove* de Maryse Condé: vers un nouvel humanisme antillais?” *The French Review*, Vol 66. No. 3 (Feb., 1993). 477-478.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid “On mesure le chemin parcouru: l’ironie et la distance prudente des années 70 ont fait place à un enracinement total, à une réflexion sincère sur la spécificité antillaise”

<sup>277</sup> Contrary to Lionnet who sees the possibility of new humanism, we recognize a pessimistic

crois aussi avec des Indiennes. Pourtant nous n'avons rien de commun avec ces nègres à tête grinnée, ces cultivateurs qui ont toujours manié le coutelas ou conduit le cabrouet à bœufs pour notre compte.<sup>278</sup>

Conflating race and class, Loulou places himself at the top of the social pyramid and disparages Sylvestre Ramsaran—the Indian patriarch whose daughter also carries the illegitimate child of Sancher—for the historical subaltern position held by those who arrived from Asia. When he reaches out to him for their shared hatred of Sancher and a father's wish to avenge their daughter's lost honor, he regrets having to speak to a man whom he considers his inferior. He muses

Il ne savait jamais trop sur quel ton lui parler car s'ils avaient certainement autant d'argent l'un que l'autre, ils n'étaient pas de même race. Vingt ans plus tôt, un Ramsaran aurait gardé les yeux baissés devant un Lameaulnes.<sup>279</sup>

But Loulou is not the only character in the novel who despises racial mixing and deplores the impending social changes that are taking place. This is also true for Man Sonson, the black healer, who deplores her son's choice for a wife in Paris because of the color of her skin, suggesting that this amounts to a form of betrayal of their ancestors.

Une femme blanche ! J'ai pleuré toutes les larmes de mon corps. C'est que nous ne sommes pas n'importe quelle qualité de nègres... Heureusement que ton papa n'est plus sur cette terre pour voir ça ! Les Blancs nous ont mis des fers aux pieds. Et tu épouses une femme blanche !<sup>280</sup>

Condé has constantly refused to speak in the name of a particular community, privileging instead individual experiences, which in *Traversée de la mangrove*

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<sup>278</sup> *Traversée*, 127.

<sup>279</sup> *Traversée*, 129.

<sup>280</sup> *Traversée*, 82.

illustrate the many ways the native land remains an oppressive space, locked in ancestral conflicts, and closed to the outside world.

Women in particular suffer the violence of Antillean society. At the mercy of their husbands and fathers, they are forced to cut short their education, marry against their will, and shoulder the responsibilities of motherhood alone. Despite belonging to two diametrically opposed families, Rosa Ramsaran (from an Indian background) and Dinah Lameaulnes (from a mixed Béké family) are united in their suffering at the hands of their overpowering husbands. Dinah's initial enthusiasm after marriage quickly becomes disillusionment as Loulou imposes his will with an iron fist, and drains the life out of Dinah's joy. Her family life becomes her prison:

J'ai voulu travailler à la pépinière... Mais Loulou s'y est opposé... Je suis donc restée chez moi, avec mes servants, mes enfants et, peu à peu, cette maison de bois...sans lumière, sans soleil... est devenue ma prison, mon tombeau.<sup>281</sup>

Similarly, Rosa Ramsaran has little say on her father's decision to marry her to Sylvestre, a rich merchant who shows up at their doorstep with "un chapeau de feutre sur la tête, des tennis aux pieds et l'air fanfaron" to take her into the prison of domestic life.<sup>282</sup> Despite his immense wealth and the promise of a comfortable material life, Rosa welcomes her new life with gloom and tears. She describes her wedding as a day when "on sabra des bouteilles et des bouteilles de veuve-clicquot, mais mes larmes coulèrent plus fort que le champagne" for "Sylvestre m'a fait mal. Il

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<sup>281</sup> *Traversée*, 103.

<sup>282</sup> *Traversée*, 160.

m'a déchiré."<sup>283</sup> It would be up to the next generation of women, manifest in the characters of Mira and Vilma, to protest against this position of passivity. In their forbidden sexual encounters with Sancher, they sow disorder within Rivière au Sel and perform what for Condé amounts to the reclaiming of their individual freedom. As our discussion of Tituba's emancipation will show, sex in Caribbean literature "operates as factor of individual, subjective liberation of the characters."<sup>284</sup>

And yet, Condé's most urgent condemnation of the tenets of the *Eloge de la Créolité* seems to rest on what she considers the movement's extreme adulation of Creole and its consideration of that language as the sole vehicle for representing cultural freedom and authentic expression in the Caribbean. Writing in French is not a sign of alienation for Condé.<sup>285</sup> She refuses to believe—as Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabe do—that "Creole... is the initial means of communication of our deep self, of our collective unconscious, of our common genius, and it remains the river of our alluvial Creoleness".<sup>286</sup> This is why she imagines the character of Lucien Evariste, a local writer who has never left the island and yet for whom Creole is not *une langue maternelle*. The fact that he is rendered impotent in front of his

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<sup>283</sup> *Traversée*, 161.

<sup>284</sup> Maryse Condé, "The Stealers of Fire: The French-Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and their Strategies of Liberation." *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 35. No. 2 Special Issue: Back to the Future of Civilization: Celebrating 30 Years of African American Studies (Nov. 2004), p. 154-165. Although Condé is writing within the context of Gisèle Pineau's *Chair Piment* (2002), this comment about female sexuality is also true to her own use of sexuality in her novels.

<sup>285</sup> This is something she argues throughout many articles, but more vehemently in "Liaison Dangereuse" in *Pour une littérature monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007. 210 "Cette crispation linguistique n'était-elle pas enfantine? Une langue possède-t-elle d'autres valeurs que celles qu'elle véhicule? N'est-elle pas un simple medium?"

<sup>286</sup> *Eloge de la créolité*, 104-105.

typewriter, by the politically charged demands of his nationalist friends to write in that language, reflects Condé's refusal to circumscribe the role of the writer to some "a priori" condition.

Tous le sommant d'écrire dans sa langue maternelle, c'est-à-dire le créole. Lucien qui, à l'âge de six ans, avait reçu de ses deux parents une paire de calottes pour avoir prononcé à voix haute la seule expression créole qu'il connaissait « A pa jé ! » en était bien empêché et, n'osant avouer son impuissance, regardait sans y toucher la machine à écrire électronique qu'il avait acheté à grands frais.

It is significant that Lucien is able to imagine himself creating again only when he has rejected the politically driven demands to write in Creole, has asserted his right to produce in French, and knows how to respond to his local critics when they question the authenticity of his texts. "Il lui faudrait refuser le vertige des idées reçues. Regarder dans les yeux de dangereuses vérités. Déplaire. Choquer" he claims, as an alter ego of Condé the writer. It should be noted that Lydie Moudileno has made the case that Condé does not believe there is some abstract and predetermined role for the West Indian writer. Instead, she suggests that for Condé "il y a, dans chaque situation, un artiste qui propose le résultat d'une recherche esthétique, à partir de son imaginaire personnel, de ses expériences et de son milieu."<sup>287</sup> Finally, the fact that Condé requested Patrick Chamoiseau to be the "first reader" of *Traversée* in order to—as he quotes her— "show that although we may have different conceptions of the novel, we can still engage in dialogue" shows to what extent her text is conceived as a direct response to Bernabé, Confiant and

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<sup>287</sup> Lydie Moudileno, *L'Ecrivain antillais au miroir de sa littérature*. Paris: Karthala, 1997. 145.

Chamoiseau's manifesto, and is geared to elicit their reaction.<sup>288</sup> Condé breaks the creative compact of *Eloge de la Créolité* when she describes a community in crisis in *Traversée de la mangrove*: She destroys the myth of a beautiful diversity upon which the writer should base her imagination, ridicules the over-signification of the Creole language, and thus questions the political motivation of its promoters.

And yet it is important to highlight that Maryse Condé does not seek to open wounds primarily for the sake of denouncing old wrongs or to lament postcolonial legacies, but rather to initiate an ethical relationship to the past that unlocks the way for healing in the present. Mourning becomes, in fact, the only path for personal freedom for a series of characters who are required to confront grief before they can be released from predetermined models of being. To better grasp how condéan mourning is inextricably bound to the writer's commitment to liberty, we will look at how Tituba, Rosélie and the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel experience bereavement. When Tituba mourns a succession of failed love affairs in *Moi Tituba sorcière*, when Rosélie comes to grip with the loss of Stephen in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, and when those living in the fictional town of Rivière au sel make peace with the disappearance of Francis Sancher in *Traversée de la mangrove*, they are equally uncovering the lies upon which they had built their lives. Mourning thus inaugurates a confrontation with truth that alters the course of their lives, and ultimately liberates the characters. Whereas death traditionally marks the end of

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<sup>288</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau and Kathleen M. Balutansky, "Reflections of Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*". *Callaloo*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 389-395. In case her mocking intertextual reference to Chamoiseau's success in Paris (included in the novel) does not prompt a response.

life, paradoxically, in Condé's novels it ushers a more authentic life for her characters. It would seem as if individual emancipation is contingent upon mourning societal demands. The following section addresses how mourning constitutes the writer's strategy to disengage from politically correct interpretations, narratives that prove constraining not just for the individual characters of her novels, but also for the writer in her literary craft.

### 3.3 Uncharted Transformations

*One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.<sup>289</sup>*

In a certain sense all mourning is a radical encounter with the limits of life—a fundamental awareness of human vulnerability to loss. This painful confrontation with the finitude of existence not only has the potential to dissolve the convictions that have always organized life, but can also challenge the certainty that prevented individuals from undergoing growth and change. Grief can be destabilizing, and thus potentially liberating, because it tends to result in a questioning of community values, individual priorities, and overall personal narratives. Indeed, besides a direct physical threat to an individual's personal safety, there are a few things in life that disrupt the coherence of living more than the pain of losing a loved one. For Judith Butler, it is impossible to

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<sup>289</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*, 21.



invoke the Protestant ethic when it comes to loss, (but) one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled... Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing.<sup>290</sup>

Those who grieve find themselves changed, sometimes in spite of their own desires and former intentions. In Maryse Condé's oeuvre, characters are "hit by waves" of grief and undergo transformations larger than the plans they had laid out for themselves—to use Butler's wording—as they confront this very human emotion.

Just like mourning plays a fundamental role in the destruction of collective myths across her oeuvre (racial solidarity, racial reconciliation, the cultural community lauded by *Eloge de la Créolité*), Condé brings into play her character's grief in order to effect a profound inner transformation. Rosélie, for instance, awakens from the role of passive wife to Stephen and becomes a self-possessed artist able to transcend the fear of naming her own paintings. Her mourning of Stephen represents the birth of the artist. Similarly, Tituba's grief transforms the presumed witch from a voiceless victim of the Salem trials into a sensual heroine who devises her own revenge: Tituba's song of rebellion. Her very human journey through the pain of losing her mother, her husband, Hester Prynne, and her Jewish lover, among many others, frees her from the silent and yet prescriptive position of the subaltern and allows her to claim her human subjectivity, in all its outspoken individuality. The nineteen characters who gather at the wake of Francis Sanher to mourn his unexpected and mysterious death are drawn into an inner exploration of their own lives. Confronting the grief that surrounds his departure, they find

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<sup>290</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

themselves face to face with their personal conflicts, prejudices, and unfulfilled dreams. Indeed, their individual quest to answer the question: “who was Francis Sancher?” sets in motion a radical reordering of the most intimate part of themselves: Sancher’s mourning launches the transformation they had yearned for but had feared to undertake in the past.

Mourning thus becomes a threshold for Condé’s characters. In imagining Rosélie’s rebirth, Tituba’s reclaimed voice, and the nineteen character’s vow to change the course of their lives, Condé highlights the many ways the instability of grief also contains the seeds of transformation. Within this transformation lies the opportunity and promise, as we hope to show, of a successful dislocation from the Global South poetics of postcoloniality.

### 3.3.1 Rosélie’s Awakening

*Elle sentait se réveiller en elle l’impatiente clameur de ses entrailles se préparant à l’enfantement*  
*[She felt the dull sensation of her insides impatiently preparing to give birth].<sup>291</sup>*

In her first appearance, Rosélie dejectedly sits up in her bed after hours of being in a fetus position—hoping to replicate the protective enclosure of her mother’s womb—terrified of the emptiness Stephen’s death had left in her life. For twenty years, she had lived according to his terms, renouncing her own plans, and following him across the planet. This opening portrait of Rosélie as an infant, unprepared and unwilling to enter the world, is repeated several times in the novel, stressing the radical transformation that takes place after Rosélie mourns Stephen.

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<sup>291</sup> *Histoire*, 317. *Story*, 311.

She had known all along that her inauthentic life had to end, but she needed a crisis—like the destabilizing event of mourning—to be forced to grow up.

Ce moment, elle l'avait attend en vain pendant vingt ans. Son indulgence, sa patience ne s'étaient jamais démenties. Elles l'avaient tenue au chaud. Comme un bébé prématuré qui ne quitte jamais sa couveuse.

[She had waited for that moment for twenty years. In vain. His indulgence and patience had never failed. They had kept her safe and warm, like a premature baby in its incubator.]<sup>292</sup>

She had welcomed Stephen's overprotective embrace as it allowed her to remain an immature child and thus avoid the responsibility—and inherent risk—of adulthood. Rosélie recognizes that "(p)artager ses jours, vivre dans son ombrage lui avait peut-être causé un dommage considérable, lui interdisant de devenir adulte."[(s)haring his existence, living in his shadow had perhaps caused her enormous damage and prevented her from becoming and adult.]<sup>293</sup> But her relationship to Stephen, as I argued before, had been a convenient fiction intended to conceal his homosexuality (not unlike the official narrative of racial reconciliation which had veiled the way rampant discrimination that stood in the way of change in South Africa). It is only when she undergoes the shock of his loss that she is forced to dismantle the convenient lies that had bound her into a position of passivity and is able to reach adulthood.

Rosélie had accepted the infantilizing and stereotypical role of a submissive woman all her life. She had followed a series of "saveurs providentiel" [providential

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<sup>292</sup> *Histoire*, 82. *Story*, 71.

<sup>293</sup> *Histoire*, 135. *Story*, 126.

rescuers] who while giving her a temporary sense of place in the world had also distracted her from her own artistic growth. After Stephen's mourning however, thanks to the unsettling experience of her grief, she reaches a point where she is prepared to change the submissive pattern that had characterized all her former romantic liaisons. When given the option to follow yet another man—a French professor by the name of Manuel Desprez—she declines the offer and recognizes how close she had come to repeating the same perverse dynamic of wanting to live a fiction.

La vie d'une femme n'est jamais finie. Il se trouve toujours des hommes pour l'aider à continuer son chemin. Salama Salama l'avait vengée de l'ennui et de la solitude de son adolescence. Stephen lui avait évité la déprime après l'abandon de Salama Salama. Faustin l'avait réchauffée du froid de la mort de Stephen. Ce Manuel s'offrait à la consoler et de la trahison de Stephen et celle de Faustin.

[The life of a woman is never over. There is always a man help her continue on her path. Salama Salama had avenged her for the boredom and solitude of her adolescence. Stephen had prevented her from having a nervous breakdown after Salama Salama abandoned her. Faustin had brought her in from the cold after Stephen's death. This Manuel was offering to comfort her for both Stephen's and Faustin's betrayal.]<sup>294</sup>

But she refuses to follow Manuel, a new avatar of Stephen and the many others who had preceded him, and returns instead to her painter's studio.

By breaking the vicious cycle of dependence that had characterized her whole life, mourning ushers a revelatory experience that is felt with the same urgency as childbirth. Condé describes this arrival to authenticity as follows:

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<sup>294</sup> *Histoire*, 314. *Story*, 308.

Sourdement, elle sentait se réveiller en elle l'impatiente clameur de ses entrailles se préparant à l'enfantement... elle s'approcha du carré de toile... et avec détermination elle se mit à peindre... Cette fois, elle était en possession de son titre. Elle l'avait trouvé avant même de commencer son ouvrage. Il avait surgi du plus profond d'elle même...

[She felt the dull sensation of her insides impatiently preparing to give birth...she approached the square of canvas...and resolutely, she began to paint... This time, she knew what her title would be. She had found it even before she had started. It had welled up from deep inside her...]<sup>295</sup>

The interiorizing effect that accompanies grief gave her the insight that she had been chasing men as a diversion from her real concern: painting. This realization, in turn, ushers an artistic awakening that ripples into her attitude towards life itself. Rosélie not only feels the urgency to return to painting and name her creations, but she looks into the future with promise. No longer afraid of South Africa and its past, she reappropriates the territory where her suffering has taken place as rightfully hers. She compares her experience to that of her African ancestors who had earned their right to call the Americas their own when they were transported to the Caribbean islands to build a plantation society based on their suffering.

Brusquement, son future lui apparaissait, voie droite, chemin tout trace, pour les années qui lui restaient à vivre...Obstinément. Elle ne quitterait pas Le Cap. Souffrance vaut titre. Cette ville, elle l'avait gagnée. Elle l'avait fait sienne en un mouvement inverse de ses ancêtres dépossédés d'Afrique, qui avaient vu surgir, tel un mirage à l'avant des caravelles de Colomb, les îlots où se feraient germer la canne et le tabac de leur re-naissance.

[Suddenly, she saw her future clearly mapped out for her in a straight line for the remaining years of her life...Obstinately. She wouldn't leave Cape Town. Suffering is equivalent to entitlement. She had earned this city. She had made it hers by reversing the journey of her ancestors, dispossessed of Africa, who had seen the isles loom up like

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<sup>295</sup> *Histoire*, 317. *Story*, 311.

a mirage to the fore of Columbus caravels, the isles where the cane and tobacco of their rebirth would germinate.]<sup>296</sup>

Once again, suffering in Maryse Condé's oeuvre ushers a momentous transformation. In her confrontation with grief, Rosélie goes from being a failed fetus that refuses to enter life, to embodying a self-assured painter filled with the conviction that her talent will open her way into the land she had intensely feared. Much like generations before her, the pain of displacement is also the source of an unknown promise of freedom.

### 3.3.2 Accepting to Live

When the small community of Rivière au Sel gathers to mourn Francis Sancher's death, the nineteen individuals who attend his funeral undergo a radical transformation. His wake initiates an inner exploration as they each come face to face with the convictions that have guided their lives. While they believe they have come together to mourn and maybe to unravel the mystery around the foreigner who had managed to pierce and create ripples within their closed community, in reality, they are embarking on a solitary and introspective journey. For Annabelle Rea the crossing at the heart of Condé's novel has nothing to do with the line that separates life and death, but rather with the internal voyage undertaken by those who attend his wake.<sup>297</sup> Each chapter constitutes a long internal monologue, a sort

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<sup>296</sup> *Histoire*, 316. *Story*, 308.

<sup>297</sup> Annabelle Rea, "Le Roman-enquête : *Les Fous de Bassan*, un modèle pour '*La Traversée de la Mangrove*'". *L'Oeuvre de Maryse Condé*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996. 132. "C'est un passage tout intérieur qui intéresse Maryse Condé ici: l'examen de conscience que font les vivants au moment de la mort de quelqu'un. C'est dans cet examen de conscience des habitants de Rivière au Sel que les rôles de Francis Sancher sont redistribués, acceptés par des gens décidés à changer leur vie."

of confession, where they take turns to offer a different portrait of Sancher. More than an answer to the question “who was Francis Sancher?” they each provide a sketch of their own relationship to the man. In these intimate and personal descriptions, a whole psychological drama is enacted when the characters reveal their unfulfilled dreams, inner battles, and ingrained prejudices.

Taking the form of an intimate confession, each story uncovers a personal tragedy where the individual’s frustrated dreams, combined with constrictive societal demands, have engendered bitterness, resentment and fear. This is particularly true for women. Mothers and wives are excluded from all activities outside of those related to motherhood, and conversely, those who choose to pursue a life outside the home, are required to surrender their desire to love and be loved. This is the case of Léocadie Timothée who had devoted her entire life to teaching the children of the lower classes, but regrets not having really lived her own life and finds herself old, despised, and lonely. She explains that she was driven by the desire to improve her community and had committed every ounce of her being towards that goal: “je voulais travailler pour ma race,” she says. But as she ages, she realizes that her wish to rise above her parents led to a form of alienation: the renouncement of the sensual side of her being: “jusqu’alors, je n’avais pas vraiment prêté attention à la figure ni au corps que le Bon Dieu m’avaient donnés.”<sup>298</sup> Her self-denial led to a form of invisibility in the eyes of men who never considered her as a woman, but rather as the image of the cruel *institutrice* she had spent so much effort building. “Mon cœur, mon corps ont oublié qu’ils appartenaient à une vivante

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<sup>298</sup> *Traversée*, 144.

et je me suis contentée de bêcher la terre rebelle de l'enseignement."<sup>299</sup> Her life story reveals the limited choices for women in the Antillean community, and how frustrated hopes are quickly transformed into anger. With Léocadie, Condé highlights the difficult choices forced upon the women in the community.

At the wake, Léocadie mourns the loss of her youth, confronts the disappointing consequences of her choices, and is able to make peace with the life she has lived. That same night, Rosa and Dinah, the other elder women of Rivière au Sel, take stock of their unfulfilled lives, identify how their roles within the community and respective homes have sabotaged their dreams, and take a vow to change the way they have lived until then. Within the space of that mournful evening, Rosa confesses the pleasure of introspection: "C'était doux, si doux de parler de moi, je ne pouvais pas m'arrêter." In finding an explanation for her indifference towards Vilma—her only female daughter—she gains the necessary information to bridge the gap that separates them.<sup>300</sup> As the light of the new day begins to make its presence felt in the room, Rosa decides to seek her child's forgiveness and to rebuild their relationship. She rehearses her future words to Vilma as follows:

Sortie de mon ventre, je t'ai mal aimée. Je ne t'ai pas aidé à éclore et tu as poussé, rabougrie. Il n'est pas trop tard pour que nos yeux se rencontrent et que nos mains se touchent. Donne-moi ton pardon.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> *Traversée*, 149.

<sup>300</sup> *Traversée*, 170-171. "Pour donner l'amour, il faut en avoir reçu beaucoup, beaucoup. Moi, je n'en avais jamais reçu. J'avais les mains vides. Je n'ai jamais fait que servir"

<sup>301</sup> *Traversée*, 171. *Crossing the Mangrove*, 141.



[I gave birth to you, but I misloved you. I neglected to help you flower and you grew stunted. It's not too late for our eyes to meet and our hands to touch. Give me your forgiveness.]

Similarly with Dinah, the wake allows her to reminisce about her short—but extremely enlightening—love affair with Sancher, a man whose eyes had pierced into her thoughts and led her into feelings she had refused to acknowledge (“il a tourné la tête vers moi et ses yeux ont plongé dans les miens comme s’il lisait dans mes pensées.”). It is in this remembering that Dinah announces her decision, a resolve that constitutes both her freedom and her healing. She has decided to leave Loulou, a man she has never loved, recover her sons, the children whose affection she had lost, and rebuild her life out of the dark seclusion of Rivière au Sel, a town whose name echoes the infertility of the character’s lives.

Moi, ma résolution est prise. Je quitterai Loulou et Rivière au Sel. Je prendrai mes garçons avec moi. Je chercherai le soleil et l’air et la lumière pour ce qui me reste à vivre.<sup>302</sup>

Dinah’s vow to leave behind the insalubrious darkness of the village to find light, air and life is in line with the other character’s transformations after the wake. Condé closes the novel with an omniscient narrator who confirms the purifying transformation that took place overnight, conveying how mourning Sancher manages to change everyone in Rivière au Sel—even those who despised the man.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> *Traversée*, 109.

<sup>303</sup> Mira claims: “Ma vraie vie commence avec sa mort.” *Traversée*, 230. Emile Etienne decides to leave the small confines of the island: “Partir. Respirer un air moins confiné.” *Traversée*, 230.

Le revirement insidieusement opéré par la mort...était spectaculaire. Certains...songeant que justice avec été faite, se sentaient purifiés...D'autres... n'étaient pas loin de sentir sourdre en eux une sorte d'affection reconnaissante pour celui qui leur avait donné le courage de refuser la défroque usée qu'ils enfilaient matin après matin et qui serrait aux entournures... Comme certains se rapprochaient de la fenêtre pour guetter la couleur du devant-jour, ils virent se dessiner un arc-en-ciel...<sup>304</sup>

To close the novel with an image of the wake's attendees looking out into the light of day to see the appearance of a rainbow after they have mourned Francis Sancher is significant. Not only is the rainbow the Judeo-Christian uttermost symbol of a new human covenant with God after the destructive and yet purifying floods, but it also brings to mind René Depestre's 1967 poem *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chrétien*. Condé has recourse to the poet's powerful image to convey a similar possibility of a new humanism, which would reconcile individual freedom with life within the community, a new form of "*humanisme antillais*" to borrow Françoise Lionnet's reading of *Traversée*.

Le personnage de Francis Sancher est bien un alter ego de l'auteure qui lui donne accès à l'altérité... une altérité qui lui permet donc d'aller au-delà de l'impasse de la différence sexuelle comme de la dialectique du particulier et de l'universel pour suggérer une nouvelle façon de mettre l'accent sur ce qui peut rapprocher individus et cultures. L'humanisme qu'elle préconise ne fait pas appel aux formes de totalisation et de négation de l'altérité qui sous-entendent l'hégémonie du Même dans la culture occidentale. Bien au contraire, cet humanisme jette « un pont, [...] une passerelle » au-dessus de l'abîme qui sépare les cultures, donnant ainsi à chacune liberté de choix et droit de parole dans le dialogue qui les réunit.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> *Traversée*, 251.

<sup>305</sup> Françoise Lionnet, "*Traversée de la Mangrove* de Maryse Condé: vers un nouvel humanisme antillais?" *The French Review*, Vol 66. No. 3 (Feb., 1993). 477-478.

### 3.3.3 From Silence to Song

In a journey through loss and grief, Tituba slowly retrieves her right to speak and transforms the silence surrounding her life and death into a celebratory song of rebellion; she becomes the female reincarnation of Mackandal, the mythical father of the Saint-Domingue revolution. Condé imagines a self-conscious character invested in having her story known, committed to repairing the historical silence surrounding her life and death, and driven by the desire to restore her humanity. Throughout the novel, like a member of a plaintive chorus commenting on the unfolding drama, Tituba asks: “Et moi, y-a-t-il un chant pour moi? Un chant pour Tituba?”<sup>306</sup> Tituba wonders whether the crimes committed against her by the racist community in colonial New England would be forgotten forever.

For Jacques Derrida mourning entails launching and carrying forward a conversation with the dead where the mourner recognizes and respects the otherness of the departed.<sup>307</sup> It is not a passive activity, but rather the dynamic acceptance of taking on the responsibility and commitment to maintain the memory and *voice* of the departed alive within the mourner. In *Moi Tituba, sorcière...noire*

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<sup>306</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 236.

<sup>307</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Mémoires—for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 35. “We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and of prosopopeia, where the possible remains impossible. Where success fails. And where faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead. It makes the other a *part* of us, between us—and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him *in us*...And inversely, the *failure* succeeds: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect of the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us.”

Maryse Condé undertakes the responsibility to mourn the death of Tituba Indien, a black slave who was wrongly accused of witchcraft in Salem Massachusetts. Her novel, in giving a voice to a forgotten woman who had all but disappeared from the historical record, performs a form of liberation from the dead and raises the question of how the past lives into the present. Condé resurrects the life of a woman who refused to accept the invisibility of her race and the silencing of her genre, and gives her the complex individuality of a woman who does not conform to any predetermined forms of being.

Indeed, Tituba's journey through loss has a humanizing effect. Once again, Condé uses mourning to perform a radical transformation on two levels. First, by mourning Tituba, the writer gradually restores Tituba's human voice. She ceases to be a footnote in the historical record and becomes a reincarnated warm-blooded woman who feels pain, endures fear, and harbors hope amidst the events that took place in Salem in 1685. Second—and as I will show in the final section of this chapter—in the grief over the loss of what appears a very long list of lovers (John Indien, Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo, Esther Prynne Christophe and Iphigène), Condé allows Tituba to brazenly proclaim her sexuality. By describing her suffering in striking detail and through the first person singular, Condé has successfully converted the young Tituba's barely audible—and nearly forgotten—plaintive cry into a loud, sexualized, and triumphant feminine song. Condé's exploration of the all-too-human mourning of a presumed witch performs a complete transformation of the voiceless victim condemned to silence. In re-imagining Tituba's grief, Condé

has restored the human complexity of a female sexual being who lived in seventeenth century New England.

Condé's emphatic title and adoption of the first person singular point of view throughout the text make obvious the writer's desire to affirm the existence and authority of a particular woman in history. She grants her heroine the power of utterance: Tituba narrates her life from her own vantage point, interprets the world around her according to her own experience, and leads the reader into the private universe of a black woman living in bondage. For Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi "in letting Tituba speak and tell her story in her own words, Condé gives her a voice, restores a history and her identity, and allows her to acquire language and thus participate in society."<sup>308</sup> In fact, as Derrida proposed in a text on Roland Barthes, in mourning and thus in remembering the departed, we are prolonging life beyond their physical death since it is only "in us that the dead may speak and ultimately reside, thereby revealing that death is not the end of being."<sup>309</sup> By allowing Tituba to speak through her mourning of her, beyond the line that separates life from death, Condé remedies three centuries of silence.

Notwithstanding, Tituba's power of speech is slowly and progressively acquired. It would seem as if it is only after the writer and reader have mourned her life and near-disappearance from the historical record, that Tituba is given an effective and audible voice. It is worth noting that in Tituba's own retelling of her

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<sup>308</sup> Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi. "Giving a Voice to Tituba: The Death of the Author?" *World Literature Today*. Vol 67. No. 4, 1993. 751-756.

<sup>309</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Roland Barthes," *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 36.

story, she acknowledges the limits of her voice while alive. For instance, when the young Tituba witnesses the murder of her mother, she remains speechless despite the fact that she also begins to feel the power of her voice gathering within her, as if ready to erupt: “je sentis se solidifier en moi comme une lave... j’eus la force de m’écloigner à petit pas, de m’accroupir et de vomir interminablement dans l’herbe” [I felt something harden inside me like lava... I gathered enough strength to tiptoe away and vomit my heart out in the grass].<sup>310</sup> Like an active volcano on the verge of exploding, her grief accumulates, but cannot be expressed through words yet.

It is not until after her death, when Condé’s mourning and remembrance has restored the otherness that her contemporaries repetitively denied her, that her silence is broken. Because Tituba has to battle and conquer a negation of her personhood, which she encounters in the gaze of others reflected back to her. This explains why the presumed witch experiences impotence in the presence of others, and at times surrenders to their idea of her. Tituba accounts for her silence by noting the futility of her human voice since her word does not carry any weight within the white community:

Au Tribunal, la parole d’un esclave, voire d’un nègre libre, ne comptait pas. Nous aurions beau nous égosiller et clamer que j’ignorais qui était Satan, personne ne nous prêterait attention.

[In court the word of a slave, even a freed slave, did not count. I could bawl and shout as much as I liked that I didn’t know who Satan was, nobody would listen to me.]<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 20-21. *I Tituba*, 8.

<sup>311</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 49. *I Tituba*, 28-29.

Even as she faces death, she chooses to remain silent since she knows that it is only after death, in her spectral presence in the writer's mournful remembrance of her, that her voice can and will be finally heard. When she is being led to the gallows, she describes her reasons for failing to speak:

A cet endroit du réquisitoire, je faillis hurler que c'était faux, que c'était menteries, cruelles et viles menteries. Puis je me ravisai. A quoi bon ? Bientôt j'attendrai au royaume où la lumière de la vérité brille sans partage.<sup>312</sup>

[At this point in the inquisition I almost screamed out that it was all untrue and nothing but vile and cruel lies. Then I thought otherwise. What was the point? Soon I would reach a kingdom where the light of truth burns bright and unrelenting.]

In fact, the authority Condé accords Tituba throughout every page of the novel is contrasted with her invisibility in the eyes of others. When Tituba recounts the denigrating experiences of servitude, she is particularly disturbed by the fact that she is denied humanity, and treated as an object devoid of life. She explains the revolting realization of her non-existence in the eyes of her master's friends as follows:

Ce qui me stupéfiait et me révoltait, ce n'était pas tant les propos qu'elles tenaient, que leur manière de faire. On aurait dit que je n'étais pas là debout, au seuil de la pièce. Elles parlaient de moi, mais en même temps, elles m'ignoraient. Elles me rayaient de la carte visible des humains. J'étais un non-être. Un invisible. Plus invisible que les invisibles, car eux au moins détiennent un pouvoir que chacun redoute. Tituba, Tituba n'avait plus de réalité que celle que voulaient bien lui concéder ces femmes.<sup>313</sup>

[It was not so much the conversation that amazed and revolted me as their way of going about it. You would think I wasn't standing there at the threshold of the room. They were talking about me and yet

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<sup>312</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 263. *I Tituba*, 172.

<sup>313</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 44. *I Tituba*, 24.

ignoring me. They were striking me off the map of human beings, I was a nonbeing. Invisible. More invisible than the unseen, who at least have powers that everyone fears. Tituba only existed insofar as these women let her exist.]

More than the physical mistreatment and verbal abuse to which she is subjected on a daily basis, Tituba, deplores her erasure as a human being. And this negation of her agency impairs her ability to speak. She confesses that when coming face to face with Susana Endicott—her white master in Barbados— words fail her: “Je restais debout devant elle et m’efforçais de trouver mes mots....Elle me paralysait.” [I remained standing in front of her and tried to find the correct words... She paralyzed me.]<sup>314</sup> Tituba’s voice is only actualized and made audible through Condé’s mourning and re-imagining of her life.

By giving Tituba a voice from the afterlife that expresses the sorrow of her silenced life and mourns her erasure, Condé confers Tituba supernatural perception and faculties. Tituba’s understanding of reality is not bound by human temporal constraints. Her vision is not limited to her present moment, but extends into the past (well before her birth when she witnessed her violent conception) and towards the future, centuries after her physical death. This supernatural ability to travel through space and time gives her the knowledge of how her story would be recorded by history:

Je sentais que dans ces procès des sorcières de Salem... mon nom ne figurerait que comme celui d’une comparse sans intérêt... Aucune, aucune biographie attentionnée et inspirée recréant ma vie et ses

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<sup>314</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 46-47. *I, Tituba*, 26.



tourments! Et cette future injustice me révoltait! Plus cruelle que la mort!<sup>315</sup>

[I felt that I would only be mentioned in passing in these Salem witchcraft trials... There would never, ever, be a careful, sensitive biography recreating my life and its suffering. And I was outraged by this future injustice that seemed more cruel than even death itself.]

And foreseeing that History would forget her and the public archives in Salem would only mention her in passing, she travels into the future to inspire Condé to write Tituba's mournful song. She returns in a sort of an afterlife, more real than her real human life, to be immortalized: "mon histoire véritable commence où celle-là finit et n'aura pas de fin" [my real story starts where this one leaves off and it has no end," she explains—for the first time in the present tense—in the epilogue.<sup>316</sup>

While it is true that Condé adjusts the genre of *testimonio* and slave narrative when she reveals her own authorial role in re-imagining Tituba by adding a short preface at the outset and a "Historical Note" after Tituba's own epilogue, it is Tituba's mournful voice from the afterlife who addresses Condé's readers in the twentieth century.<sup>317</sup> Like Alejo Carpentier in *El Reino de este mundo*, Condé re-

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<sup>315</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 173. *I Tituba*, 110.

<sup>316</sup> *Moi, Tituba*, 267. *I, Tituba*, 175

<sup>317</sup> There is a two-line preface in the first page of the novel where Condé claims to have communicated with Tituba from the afterlife: "Tituba et moi, avons vécu en étroite intime pendant un an. C'est au cours de nos interminable conversations qu'elle m'a dit ces choses qu'elle n'avait confiées à personne" [Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else.]

For Kaiama Glover, the brief subversive presence of the author herself "bookending" Tituba's tale has the essential function of interrogating the hidden sexual subtexts included in this particular literary genre and thus freeing her heroine from those constraints by granting Tituba "an unredeemed inconsistency that the slave woman's literary ancestors could in no way afford to indulge." Kaiama Glover,

creates a female Mackandal who defies death and returns to the world of the living to become a myth larger than life, transformed into the spirit of revolt itself.

Car vivante comme morte, visible comme invisible, je continue à panser, à guérir. Mais surtout je me suis assigné une autre tâche... Aguerir le cœur des hommes. L'alimenter de rêves de liberté. De victoire. Pas une révolte que je n'aie fait naître. Pas une insurrection. Pas une désobéissance... C'est dans leurs cœurs que les miens garderont mon souvenir, sans nul besoin de graphies. <sup>318</sup>

[For now that I have gone over to the invisible world I continue to heal and cure. But primarily I have dedicated myself to another task... I am hardening men's hearts to fight. I am nourishing them with dreams of liberty. Of victory. I have been behind every revolt. Every insurrection. Every act of disobedience.]

If as Derrida suggested that it is only “in us that the dead may speak and ultimately reside, thereby revealing that death is not the end of being”, then Condé has given Tituba an afterlife that returns her humanity, respects her otherness, and corrects the historical silence surrounding her life and death. Through her mourning of the forgotten black witch of Salem, Condé has overturned the invisibility that had oppressed and denied the woman's humanity and preserves her memory through her readers. To this respect Tituba's mournful song—now in the present tense—is significant since it provides an answer to the question that had haunted her the whole narrative:

Il s'est trompé, Christopher, ou sans doute aura-t-il voulu me blesser: elle existe, la chanson de Tituba! Je l'entends d'un bout à l'autre de l'île, de North Point à Silver Sands, de Bridgetown à Bottom Bay. Elle court la crête des mornes. Elle se balance au bout de la fleur de

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“Tituba's Fall: Maryse Condé's Counter-Narrative of the Female Self.” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*. Vol. 15, No. 1, January, 2011, 99-106.

<sup>318</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 268.260 *Tituba*, 175.

balisier. L'autre jour, j'ai entendu un garçon de quater ou cinq ans la fredonner.<sup>319</sup>

[Christopher was wrong or probably he wanted to hurt me—there *is* a song about Tituba ! I hear it from one end of the island to the other, from North Point to Silver Sands, from Bridgetown to Bottom Bay. It runs along the ridge of the hills. It is poised on the tip of the helicornia. The other day I heard a boy four or five years old humming it.]

The sounding of her sorrowful song across the landscape, roaming the island's geography and stirring others to hum its melody reverses a radical erasure. With her returned humanity, Tituba is now free to proclaim her individuality, a singularity that as we will see ahead, takes the form of an unbridled sexuality.

### 3.4. Characters Unbound

In every novel Maryse Condé constructs solitary characters driven by the impulse to flee a set of confining walls and demolish, on their way out of their perceived prison, the collective beliefs that had bound them to that space in the first place. These constrictive spaces vary from novel to novel, but the burning desire to escape them remains the same throughout the entire condean universe. For Régis Antoine, there is in Condé's oeuvre what he calls *un romantisme de la désillusion*, the pervading existential experience in which her characters sustain a conflictive relationship with the outside world.<sup>320</sup> Their interior reality—their dreams, hopes

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<sup>319</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 267. *Tituba*, 175.

<sup>320</sup> Régis Antoine, "Un Romantisme de la désillusion." *L'œuvre de Maryse Condé*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996. 57. Antoine is referring to George Lukacs tripartite evolution of the novel as it was theorized in *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971. 112. For Lukacs, with *Romanticism of disillusionment* "we are not dealing with an abstract *a priori* condition on the face of life, a condition which seeks to realize itself in action and therefore provokes conflict with the outside world which make up the story of the novel; but rather a purely interior reality which is full of content and more or less complete in itself enters into competition

and aspirations—are larger and more expansive than the roles society accords them.

When Condé imagines her characters overcoming their limitations, she is giving life in fiction to her own efforts to escape the confines of Antillean writing and thus have access to the World Republic of Letters. Condé's characters function as an alter ego of the writer herself since she also finds the space allotted to her—as an Antillean woman writing in French—as exceedingly constrictive. Much like her characters strive towards a freedom of expression that would allow the largeness of their inner experience to flourish, Condé is combating the political, linguistic and regional classifications that have delimited the creative possibilities of French writers from the Caribbean. Through her imagined and unbound alter egos: Tituba, Rosélie, Sancher, Lucien Evariste, and Emile Etienne—to name just a few of her many doubles—Condé seizes the right to represent an inner reality beyond the geographical borders readers and critics have come to expect of her, without ever denying the place of her birth.

Condé shifts away from collective representations—that would grant a voice to a nation, a race, a culture—to give priority to an individual subjectivity. And while it is true that she imagines lonely characters controlled by a hateful destiny, she also accords them an unparalleled lucidity. Their consciousness and clarity of vision is precisely what restores their dignity and respectability. When Tituba

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with the reality of the outside world, leads a rich and animated life of its own and, with spontaneous self-confidence, regards itself as the only true reality... the failure of every attempt to realize this equality is the subject of the work."

refuses the role of female victim that history has imposed on her (as well as its silencing) and proclaims instead her libidinal selfhood, she is also breaking through predetermined models of freedom in West Indian writing. She gives Condé the creative material to dislocate the collective voice of black consciousness: Tituba ceases to be an over-significant other and is given the right to be just a woman.

Similarly, the moment Rosélie seizes the power to name her paintings, works of art that fail to conform to what is expected of her as an Antillean black artist, she affirms her independence from the place of her birth and claims as hers the sites where she has lived, loved, and suffered: South Africa. Through this gesture, the writer privileges the present over the past, and relinquishes nostalgic notions of a lost homeland.

As for the three avatars of the writer in *Traversée de la mangrove*—Lucien Evariste, Sancher and Emile Etienne—they each are forced to recognize that writing cannot effect the social and political transformation they had aspired. But, their failure—their inability to write—also contains the seed of their liberation. For these characters reflect, from different angles, creative solutions to overcome the impasse of an over-theorized and exaggerated politically engaged position of the Antillean writer. Through them, Condé attacks the confusion between literature and politics that has plagued writers in the Global South and calls into question “the sacrosanct notion of commitment” inherited from Sartre and Césaire.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Maryse Condé, “Sketching a Literature”, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*. New York: Seagull Books, 2014. 213.

Mourning, as it has been argued in this chapter, precipitates the encounter of two colliding worlds: the internal with the external. As we will see in what follows, the transformation brought about by mourning unbinds Condé's characters from predetermined models of being. The "mirror effect" between the writer and her doubles aims to go beyond the historical configurations of French Antillean writing and really participate in what Pascale Casanova theorized as "The World Republic of Letters" previously discussed.

The recurrent presence of characters who are artists in Maryse Condé's writing has been the object of several studies.<sup>322</sup> For Lydie Moudileno, these portraits allow Condé to demystify the status of the writer since they give her the tools to elaborate "a system of representation such that on the one hand the artist serves to unveil the dynamic of their communities, while simultaneously revealing

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<sup>322</sup> See Leah D. Hewitt, "Inventing Antillean Narrative: Maryse Condé and Literary Tradition" *Studies in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature*. Vol. 17. Issue 1, Article 7. 1993. For Hewitt Condé's self-consciousness in *Traversée de la mangrove* combines two preoccupations: bringing into the foreground the "native foreigner" status of the writer; and experimenting with self-referential literary devices comparable to those used by writers like Nathalie Sarraute and others among the Nouveau Roman. Thérèse Migraine-George, "Writing as Explosion: Maryse Condé's Transnational Textual Bodies" in *From Francophonie to World Literature in French: Ethics, Poetics, and Politics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. 93-128. Migraine-George argues that for Condé this reflexivity responds to a view of literature as the symbolic yet infinite space to question personal, political, emotional and ideological positions. Since most of her questions remain unanswered, Condé, according to Migraine-George, performs "an explosion of pre-established codes and meanings" a jarring but salutary explosion "which gives birth to an experimental literary praxis shared between the imaginative responsibility of the writer and the interpretive engagement of the reader."

his inability to represent that community.”<sup>323</sup> For Dawn Fulton her work’s reflexivity “embodies a sustained dialogue with the critical discussion surrounding her writing” and seeks to expose the ways in which the lens of postcolonial theory—through which most of her work is seen—limits and binds her novels to readings of cultural identity as “Caribbean”, “Third World”, and “feminist.”<sup>324</sup> According to Fulton, Condé puts on display the blind spots of postcolonial reading practices through parody and extreme skepticism to invite readers to go beyond this reductive understanding of her work.

In addition to these theoretical considerations, there is in Condé’s continual recreation of a mirror effect in her novels—through artists who are endlessly confronted with the question of what it means to create—a desire to explore her own changing role as writer in a world where shifting borders, problematic national affiliations, and unstable identities have ceased to provide meaning. Just like she unbinds herself and her writing from the themes, political issues, and identity crises that have come to characterize literature of the French West Indies to assert her independence and voice as a writer, she refuses to provide a closed definition on what it means to write, giving fiction the freedom she aspires for herself and her characters. For Condé thus, this mournful self-reflexivity is also a meditation on how her solitary and journey through a diverse geography, across different historical times, and narrative strategies enlivens and contributes to literature. This

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<sup>323</sup> Lydie Moudileno, “Portrait of the Artist as Dreamer Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove* and *Les Dernier Rois Mages*.” *Callaloo*, Vol. 18, No.3 Maryse Condé: A Special Issue (Summer, 1995), pp. 626-640.

<sup>324</sup> Dawn Fulton, *Signs of Dissent*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008.

unbounded questioning of what it means to be a writer stems from the absolute refusal to believe that she has found the answer, or better yet that there is an answer to that question. In her own words her books repeat the same question through different means:

L'objet est toujours le même. La forme des stratégies narratives change à chaque livre, mais le fond du problème c'est la femme qui cherche à être elle-même... pour voir comment on peut-être soi dans un monde où on vous oblige à être "nous".<sup>325</sup>

### 3.4.1 Tituba's Freedom

*By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions...  
Write your self. Your body must be heard...*

Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse"

The sexual violence that gives life—literally and figuratively—to Condé's heroine in *Moi, Tituba* becomes the energy that affirms her human individuality. While the novel does open with the violent rape of Tituba's mother aboard the slave ship that transported her to the Americas, the novel almost immediately morphs into an exploration of Tituba's inner psychology, where sexuality plays a central role. As we will see, sexuality ceases to illustrate the oppression and inhuman abuse under which black women lived during slavery, and is strategically deployed as the very means Condé uses to claim for her heroine an imperfect humanity. In creating a fiction of feminine desire that is essentially unknown in postcolonial literature,

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<sup>325</sup> Noëlle Carruggi, "Écrire en Maryse Condé Entretien avec Maryse Condé New York, 11 janvier 2009", *Maryse Condé Rébellion et transgressions*. Paris: Karthala, 2010. 218.



Condé unbinds, on the one hand, her character from a position of victimhood, and her writing, on the other hand, from having to chronicle the crimes of slavery to exorcise suffering. By writing desire, Condé is affirming Tituba's subjectivity and reclaiming a territory from where slave women have been banished. She imagines other positions for a black female subject in history.

Tituba's sexuality breaks all models of freedom. According to Kaiama Glover, Tituba's unconventional sexual choices in the novel can be read as a "provocative intervention into the female slave narrative tradition" since they counter "the model of the enslaved woman's sexuality as dispossessed".<sup>326</sup> Glover contrasts Condé's engagement with the autobiographical literary form used by Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs where the female slave, who battles and acquires her freedom, is invested on representing herself as virtuous and sexually pure.<sup>327</sup> Tituba on the other hand is allowed to express an unsettling sexuality: it crosses racial lines and ventures into the realms of homosexuality and incest. It can be argued that Tituba's lust for men—and women—is like Condé's lust for writing. Both claim an individualism that contradicts a collective project. By opting to write a narrative that takes a considerable distance from what is expected of a writer from the Black Atlantic, a narrative that does not conform to the narrative of sexual victimhood, and directed towards an individual emancipatory project, Condé is performing a

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<sup>326</sup> Kaiama Glover, "Tituba's Fall: Maryse Condé's Counter-Narrative of the Female Self." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*. Vol. 15, No. 1, Jan 2011. 99-106.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. See also Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*. *Six Women's Slave Narratives*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Oxford U P, 1988. ii-23. Harriet, Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston, MA: Published for the Author, 1861.

form of betrayal and yet is also claiming her prerogative and freedom as author. It is noteworthy that Condé, when describing the marginal position of women writers in the Caribbean and how they introduce disorder into a field that has denied them access, she singles out sex as a factor of individual, subjective liberation.<sup>328</sup>

Tituba does not shy away from her body's desires. She plunges into their depth, acknowledges their contradictions, and marvels at their power over her. With Tituba's sexuality, Condé restores the human complexity that was missing from one-dimensional perspectives of female slave narratives and explores new subject positions for black women living in the Americas during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The summons of the body's desires affirms the female self according to Hélène Cixous who links the act of writing—and telling *her* story—to the act of reclaiming every inch of her desiring body:

To Write. An act which will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories that have been kept under seal; it will tear her way from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty.<sup>329</sup>

Tituba awakens to an unknown part of herself—the sensual self—when she meets John Indien and decides to abandon the safety of her solitary isolation in the forest to follow the man she loves. But the young woman recognizes that in pursuing her

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<sup>328</sup> Maryse Condé, “The Stealers of Fire: The French-Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and their Strategies of Liberation.” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 35. No. 2, Special Issue: Back to the Future of Civilization: Celebrating 30 Years of African American Studies. Nov. 2004. 154-164.

<sup>329</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse,” *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Coutrivron. New York: Schocken Books, 1981. 250.

selfish lust for the man, she is offending and, to some degree, betraying her ancestors and all the generations before her. Like Job sat in suffering for seven days and seven nights as a test to his character and faithfulness to God, Tituba grieves, for the same Biblical length of time, the emotional battle she must wage to affirm her individuality and profess her loyalty to herself.

En dépit de tout cela, j'envisageais de recommencer à vivre parmi eux, dans leur sein, sous leur coupe. Tout cela par goût effréné d'un mortel. Est-ce que ce n'était pas folie ? Folie et trahison ? Je luttai contre moi-même cette nuit-là et encore sept nuits et sept jours...Je ne souhaite à personne de vivre les tourments par lesquels je suis passée. Remords. Honte de soi. Peur panique.<sup>330</sup>

This is how Condé introduces Tituba's psychological upheaval, a conflict that gets replayed every time she rediscovers a new object of her desire. And this inner exploration of the desiring self, as Tituba acknowledges, opens new paths for her, uncharted ways of being. When in a daydream during her stay in prison Tituba fantasizes about Hester, she confesses how her homoerotic desire can lead into other realms of possibility.

Doucement le plaisir m'envahit, ce qui m'étonna. Peut-on éprouver du plaisir à se serrer contre un corps semblable au sien? Le plaisir avait toujours eu pour moi la forme d'un autre corps dont les creux épousaient mes bosses et dont les bosses se nichaient dans les tendres plaines de ma chair. Hester m'indiquait-elle le chemin d'une autre jouissance? <sup>331</sup>

Although this is as far as Condé goes in suggesting a homosexual attraction to Hester, by giving Tituba the freedom to express this part of her self, Condé is giving back to her heroine the complexity that a position as marginalized subjectivity did

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<sup>330</sup> *Moi, Tituba*, 37.

<sup>331</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 190.

not recognize. The fixed notion of the slave, defined in terms of her subjugation, foreclosed other readings of Tituba.

It is important to emphasize that Tituba would rather express her sexuality and follow her human passions than secure manumission. With every single one of all the long list of failed romantic entanglements— fruitless relationships that must be mourned—Tituba surrenders her freedom. It would seem as if her unbound sexuality is a sort of *tragic flaw* that condemns her to servitude. But, what this really means is that her inner independence is more important than a collective and outward sign of emancipation. Tituba's libidinal desires, as Hester Prynne's reproach to her highlights, trumps all other narratives— even those of resisting white domination.<sup>332</sup> Tituba's marriage to John Indien, lesbian attraction for Hester, love for her Jewish master Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo, brief affair with the maroon leader Christopher, and incestual relationship with Iphigène (the young man who could have been her son), all these liaisons contradict the more traditional models of the enslaved woman's sexuality. With every single one of Tituba's decisions, Condé guides the reader through an intricate web of conflicting desires, fears, and guilt. By so doing, she restores the psychological depth of a woman who had only been known for her enslavement.

Tituba's inaugural encounter with desire is a form of self-consciousness from which she does not separate again: "Je voulais cet homme comme je n'avais jamais

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<sup>332</sup> While meeting Tituba in a Salem prison, Hester complains: "Tu aimes trop l'amour, Tituba! Je ne ferai jamais de toi une féministe!" Maryse Condé, *Moi Tituba*, 160.

rien voulu avant lui. Je désirais son amour comme je n'avais jamais désiré aucun amour. Même pas celui de ma mère."<sup>333</sup> This is how she describes the inner upheaval that awakens within her a set of contradictions and leads her into a series of decisions where she abdicates her freedom. For Tituba is prepared to go to any lengths to fulfill her libidinousness— to go the egoic route— even if this means a return to slavery. Because when Tituba follows John Indien to live under Susanna Endicott's tyrannical rule, she is choosing servitude. Although she was born into slavery, Tituba had fled into the forest after her mother's execution and had lived freely with Man Yaya, a hermit healer who inducted her into the art of plants. But the self-possessed woman chooses bondage willingly and consciously since her desiring self takes precedence. And the paradoxical nature of her choice is not lost on Tituba who, upon seeing a horde of slaves disembarking at the dock in Bridgetown, reflects on how she is *choosing her chains* and walking *willingly* towards the slave traders.

Les esclaves qui descendaient par fournées entières des négriers et que toute la bonne société de Bridgetown s'assemblaient pour regarder afin d'en railler en chœur leur démarche... ils n'avaient pas choisi leurs chaînes. Ils n'avaient pas marché, de leur plein gré, vers la mer somptueuse et démontée, pour se livrer aux trafiquants et offrir leurs dos à l'étampage. Moi c'était là ce que j'avais fait.<sup>334</sup>

And yet this first decision to act according to her lustfulness, and go against the traditional narrative of female emancipation, is not an isolated incident in Tituba's life. Tituba explains that she would rather refuse her emancipation than to be forced to separate from the objects of her desire. Love and the mourning of its loss eclipse

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<sup>333</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 35.

<sup>334</sup> *Moi Tituba*, 45.

classical aspirations to emancipation. With the portrayal of a grieving lover, Condé has restored Tituba's humanity since love is the most humanizing of all emotions.

### 3.4.2. The Power to Name

Rosélie, Condé's alter ego in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, is an artist whose voice has been silenced. Unable to name her creations, works that do not conform to what is expected of her as a Guadeloupean black painter, she relies on Stephen—her white European husband—to find a title for all her paintings. The symbolism of this gesture is significant since it echoes the ways literature from the West Indies has been defined from the outside, trapped in a position to represent for the world's consumption a postcolonial region and its politics. Through Rosélie's mourning of Stephen, Condé liberates creativity from this reactive stance and stretches the geographical constraints of artists from the Global South. At the end of the novel, after Condé's heroine has grieved the loss of Stephen, she finds a title to her painting for the first time and resumes the creative work she had abandoned during the period of mourning. Equally important, when Rosélie decides to claim South Africa and Cape Town as hers, she takes possession of a part of the world that had been denied to her, declaring that the place of one's birth, as well as the national borders that used to define belonging, have ceased to imprison individuals. Just like Rosélie is free to call Cape Town hers, the *Tout-Monde* is Condé's for the taking.

Condé constructs a self-conscious and insecure artist who doubts not only the quality of her work but also the authenticity of the themes that inspire her.<sup>335</sup> And Rosélie is justified in her fears since her paintings fail to satisfy most of her critics who have come to expect the colorful life of the Caribbean in her painting, precisely the subjects she is not interested in creating. Just like when she was a young child her art teacher in Guadeloupe was horrified at seeing her creations and claimed that the subject of her compositions did not reflect reality, the African-American artists in attendance at the festival organized by the Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn find fault with Rosélie's wish to go beyond race consciousness in her creative work.<sup>336</sup> The omniscient narrator, interrupting the stream of consciousness narrative that characterizes most of the novel, reports how Rosélie is perceived as lacking any talent since "(s)es créations étaient dépourvues de l'opacité que génère l'authenticité culturelle" [her paintings lacked that opacity generated by cultural authenticity].<sup>337</sup> Rosélie's non-conformity with an *authentic* cultural production that would mirror her racial identity, geographical origins, or national experience is

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<sup>335</sup> Condé describes Rosélie's paintings as lacking the vivid colors, the carefree joy, and the exoticism that is expected from Caribbean art. The world has come to expect images in line with Haitian primitive art, embodied in the works popularized by Préfète Duffaut (1923-2012). Rosélie's creations are at odds with the preconceived notions of Caribbean art ("peinture si peu coloriée, si peu riante, si peu exotique en un mot... »)

<sup>336</sup> Medgar Evers College is a traditionally black university in Brooklyn named after the African-American civil rights activist from Mississippi assassinated for his campaign to overturn school segregation in the U.S.

<sup>337</sup> *Histoire*, 43. *Story*, 33. This cultural authenticity is anathema to Condé's from whom

the reason for her lack of commercial success.<sup>338</sup> In this move, we recognize Condé's critical posture vis-à-vis the very idea of an *authentic* art, a position defended by the writers of *Eloge* and which Condé abhors for its essentialization of West Indian culture.<sup>339</sup>

In one of its periodic intrusions into Rosélie's inner dialogues, the omniscient narrator—an echo of Condé's voice herself—compares painting and writing, establishing the parallel between the author and her main character. In an authoritative voice, it describes both artistic expressions as devoid of material reward or tangible utility: "La peinture est comme la littérature. Sans profit matériel ni utilité immédiats." (Painting is like literature. No immediate gain or utility.)<sup>340</sup> As a matter of fact, Condé insists on portraying the artist as a mournful and suffering character, a prisoner of the need to bring into being the intensity of a grieving inner world, and yet uncertain of the validity of her efforts. Rosélie describes the creative process as motivated by the painful and agonizing urgency to

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<sup>338</sup> *Histoire*, 160. *Story*, 151. While on the one hand, her teacher complains of the lack of mimesis in her creations: "La maîtresse de dessin surtout se plaignait: il faut voir ses compositions libres. Des horreurs...Ces qualités de choses ne se font pas dans notre pays." [The art teacher in particular complained "You should see her free compositions. Hideous!...Those sort of things don't happen around here.."], on the other hand, the African-American artists denounce artists like Rosélie who are not preoccupied with recording the oral tradition of a black experience are thus condemning their past to disappear: "Dès lors, les merveilleuses histoires qui composent le patrimoine du peuple noir, ces histoires transmises de bouche à oreille par l'oralité, étaient condamnés à dépérir. » [As a result, the wonderful stories that made up the heritage of the black people, those stories transmitted from mouth to mouth, were destined to perish.] *Histoire*, 203, *Story*, 195.

<sup>339</sup> Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant, *Eloge de la Créolite*, 101: "The Creole literature we are elaborating takes it as a principle... to perceive the human grandeur of the djobeurs. To grasp the depth of life in Morne Pichevin. To understand vegetable markets."

<sup>340</sup> *Histoire*, 18. *Story*, 7.



translate the contents of the imagination, and its practitioner as completely independent from external criticism.

Elle ignorait si sa création était valable. Comment en avoir la certitude? Simplement, elle ne pouvait s'empêcher de peindre. Peindre comme un forçat à la chaîne. Un forçat dont la servitude ne connaîtra pas de fin.<sup>341</sup>

[She didn't know whether her creations were valid. How could she know for certain? Simply, she could not help painting. Like a convict in a chain gang. A convict whose bondage knows no end.]

In this commentary about critical reception, the voice of the author erupts into the fabric of the narrative as one of the many meditations on the process of creation.

Condé uses this opportunity to declare her independence from what is expected of her as an Antillean writer, professing ignorance about the usefulness and/or validity of her creations.

Condé raises the issue of interpretative authority when Rosélie proves unable to name her paintings, entrusting this responsibility to Stephen—the white scholar of literature. Condé builds a mournful character who surrenders ownership and control of her creations over to Stephen, an outside authority figure whose imagination excels at classifying her work:

Elle avait le plus grand mal à trouver un titre. Elle désignait ses toiles 1,2,3,4 ou A, B, C, D, laissant à Stephen le soin de les baptiser, tâche à laquelle son imagination excellait.<sup>342</sup>

[She had great difficulties finding a title. She classified her canvases 1,2,3,4, or A, B, C, D, leaving Stephen to find a name, something his imagination excelled at.]

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<sup>341</sup> *Histoire*, 58. *Story*, 48.

<sup>342</sup> *Histoire*, 18. *Story*, 8.

Conveying an order, codifying meaning, and altering perception, naming imparts a sense of permanence unto the impermanent condition of human creations. The act of naming—from its first discussion in literature in Plato’s *Cratylus* and its emblematic appearance in the book of *Genesis* in the *Bible*—has been inextricably linked to the act of creation itself.<sup>343</sup> And yet, it is Stephen who has been responsible for this final act of creation, much like literary critics have located and circumscribed Condé’s works within the category of French Antillean writing, the “Black Atlantic”, “feminism” among many other minority labels. After mourning Stephen’s death, on account of her confrontation with loss, Rosélie reclaims the right to name her creations. Here Condé is also proclaiming her freedom to bring into being stories that do not fit within the parameters established by the category of French West Indian writing, the confining space where her work is persistently circumscribed.

If Condé draws attention to the link between interpretative authority and naming, it is because the space of mourning constitutes a creative ritual of passage, a coming into life, and a rebirth. This is why she ends her novel with the convergence of two completed acts of creation: the title of her novel—*Histoire de la femme cannibale*— and the title of Rosélie’s painting—*femme cannibale*— which her character finally manages to name. The last two words in the novel “Femme cannibale” seal the mirror effect between Rosélie and Condé and highlight how mourning for the painter and the writer is a productive space. In it, the artist

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<sup>343</sup> Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus* is the first recorded reflection on the act of naming. In the Bible, when God gives Adam the power to name the creatures on earth, He is sharing with him the power over the created world.

crosses the threshold of creation in a final overcoming of self-consciousness and silence:

Pour ces yeux-là, le monde alentour ne comptait pas. Seul importait ce qui bouillonnait à l'intérieur et dont nul n'avait conscience... Sourdement, elle sentait se réveiller en elle l'impatiente clameur de ses entrailles se préparant à l'enfantement... Cette fois, elle était en possession de son titre.<sup>344</sup>

[For those eyes, the surrounding world did not count. Only what boiled inside mattered and that remained a mystery.... She felt the dull sensation of her insides impatiently preparing to give birth... This time, she knew what her title would be.]

With the naming of her painting, Rosélie not only recovers her voice and reclaims the right to give meaning to her creations, but also proclaims her independence from Guadeloupe and the French Antilles. She has dislocated—thanks to grief—from the external demands to return to the native land and ventures into new spaces across the *Tout-monde*.

While Rosélie had never felt at home in Cape Town (a place whose violence, racial discrimination, and social stratification continuously betrayed the official narrative of reconciliation) once she has mourned Stephen, she makes the surprising decision to remain in that city. The suffering she has endured in its territory, the difficult experiences she has encountered in its streets have earned her the right to stay and claim it as hers:

Elle ne quitterait pas Le Cap. Souffrance vaut titre. Cette ville, elle l'avait gagnée. Elle l'avait fait sienne en un mouvement inverse de ses ancêtres, dépossédés d'Afrique, qui avaient vu surgir, tel un mirage à

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<sup>344</sup> *Histoire*, 317. *Story*, 311.

l'avant des caravelles de Colomb, les îlots où ils feraient germer la canne et le tabac de leur re-naissance.<sup>345</sup>

[She wouldn't leave Cape Town. Suffering is equivalent to entitlement. She had earned this city. She had made it hers by reversing the journey of her ancestors, dispossessed of Africa, who had seen the isles loom up like a mirage to the fore of Columbus's caravels, the isles where the cane and tobacco of their rebirth would germinate.]

By asserting her right to represent historical, social, and artistic spaces distant from the place of her birth, Rosélie—as Condé's alter ego—is alleging that the homeland and the national borders that used to define writers have ceased to enclose the artist's imagination. This is significant because as long as a writer is bound to represent a political or national project, her oeuvre lacks the literary capital to enter the World Republic of Letters.<sup>346</sup> While Condé still conceives characters who trace their roots back to her native Guadeloupe and acknowledge the culture of their ancestors, she does not bind them exclusively to the place of their birth. She has liberated writing from the isolation and self-representation imposed on writers from the Global South. No longer bound to write about creole markets, storytellers, and magical realism, she is free to imagine distant places and her own relationship to them.

Brusquement, la pensée d'un adieu au Cap la déchirait. Elle s'apercevait qu'à son insu des liens l'amarraient à cette ville, des liens qu'elle n'avait jamais noués avec aucun autre endroit. Même celui de sa naissance. Libérée par magie de ses peurs, elle s'aventurait dans

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<sup>345</sup> *Histoire*, 315. *Story*, 309.

<sup>346</sup> Pascale Casanova, *La République Mondiale des Lettres*, 262. "à l'intérieur de ces espaces démunis, les écrivains sont condamnés à une thématique nationale ou populaire: ils doivent développer, défendre, illustrer, fût-ce en les critiquant, les aventures, l'histoire et les controverses nationales."

les rues, se repaissant de cette beauté insaisissable et arrogante, tellement particulière.<sup>347</sup>

[Suddenly the thought of saying farewell to Cape Town was heartrending. She realized that, unbeknownst to her, ties were binding her to this city, ties she had never formed with any other place. Even that of her birthplace. Liberated as if by magic from her fears, she would walk through the streets drinking in the arrogant, enigmatic beauty that was so special.]

Rosélie's connection to Cape Town, as an outpost of the *Tout-Monde*, is not based on her birth, but rather on her lived experiences. For as Glissant highlights in his poetic theorization of the concept, the *Tout-Monde* is not the totality of the world itself, but rather a mode of cognition, a vision of the world where changing events refashion the viewer as well "because the *tout-monde* is the world that tossed around in your thoughts while tossing you in its swell".<sup>348</sup> Her grief over Stephen's disappearance has unbound Rosélie from feeling like an outsider, seeking to return to a lost yet inaccessible home, but finally at ease to enjoy the city of Cape Town. This call to enter the *Tout-monde* and leave behind the failed promises, as well as the certainty of the native land, is made possible through her experience of mourning. Every character attending the wake of Francis Sancher in *Traversée de la mangrove* hears a similar call.

### 3.4.3 Longing for the *Tout-Monde*

Failure haunts the nineteen characters who gather to mourn Francis Sancher in Maryse Condé's 1989 novel *Traversée de la mangrove*. As Judith Butler proposes, the space of mourning is a space of transformation where the mourner is forced to undergo a revision of her life. While the confrontation with Sancher's death allows

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<sup>347</sup> *Histoire*, 297. *Story*, 291.

<sup>348</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Tout-monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993. 208.

them the necessary space and time to review their unfulfilled lives and frustrated dreams, it also gives them the opportunity to envision a way out of their self-imposed prison. The inclusion of three—failed—writers within the narrative is particularly enlightening since it gives Condé an ideal platform to challenge the constrictive tenets of *Eloge de la créolité* and to propose a solution for the imprisonment of Antillean writing in French. As it was argued before, *Traversée* not only appeared the same year as Chamoiseau, Bernabé and Confiant's manifesto, but also named Patrick Chamoiseau as its first reader.<sup>349</sup> Condé writes a novel intended to be a creative response to what she considers the exaggerated theoretical regimentation of the region's writing in terms of form and content. With the unsuccessful literary projects of Sancher, Emile Etienne and Lucien Evariste, Condé, on the one hand, establishes the myopic view of literature proposed in the *Eloge*, and on the other hand, puts forward a way out of their creative impasse.

For Therese Migraine-George, Sancher's accomplishment takes the form of and resides within his failure.<sup>350</sup> Because *Traversée de la mangrove* is built upon a project and a text that constantly questions itself, interrogating both its meaning and its reason for being, Sancher's unsuccessful novel, insofar as it sheds light into

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<sup>349</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau and Kathleen M. Balutansky, "Reflections on Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*." *Callaloo*, Vol. 14, No. 2. Spring, 1991. Pp. 389-395. In its first endnote, Chamoiseau's article explains that "In the French Caribbean, when a book is first published, it is introduced to the public by a 'public reader', often a prominent writer."

<sup>350</sup> Thérèse Migraine-George, "De *Traversée de la Mangrove* à *Histoire de la femme cannibale*: l'art comme arme miraculeuse chez Maryse Condé." *Romanic Review*. Vol. 101. No. 3. Pp. 497-519. "Dans ce roman, Condé semble donc suggérer que la réussite du projet littéraire amorcé par Sancher réside en quelque sorte dans son échec même ».

the futility of writing and yet declares its absolute freedom, does not fail in the end. While Sancher's novel never actually materializes into a book, Condé's novel—by the same title—does, and is predicated on his very death and failure. When Sancher travels to Rivière au Sel to set out to purge some ancestral imaginary curse by attempting to write the historical novel that would unveil his identity, he faces the impossibility of untangling a genealogy that haunts him. In Sancher's conscious decision to write, despite the futility of his quest, lays Condé's commentary on the purpose of literature. With his failure, the author spells out her opposition to defining identity. For what matters is not the answers—in Sancher's case the non-answers—but rather the questions he raises along the way. This is why he is at peace with the idea of his failure and confides to Vilma that his book would never be completed since the title he has found contains the seed of its own impossibility:

Tu vois, j'écris. Ne me demande pas à quoi ça sert. D'ailleurs, je ne finirai jamais ce livre puisque, avant d'en avoir tracé la première ligne et de savoir ce que je vais y mettre de sang, de rires, de larmes, de peur, d'espoir, enfin de tout ce qui fait qu'un livre est un livre et non pas une dissertation de raseur, la tête à demi fêlée, j'en ai trouvé le titre : « Traversée de la Mangrove. »<sup>351</sup>

[You see, I'm writing. Don't ask me what's the point of it. Besides, I'll never finish this book because before I've even written the first line and known what I'm going to put in the way of blood, laughter, tears, fears and hope, well everything that makes a book a book and not a boring dissertation by a half-cracked individual, I've already found the title: "Crossing the Mangrove."]

Similarly, in answering Lucien Evariste's enthusiastic questions about his presumed glorious past as a revolutionary, Sancher, in a fatherly tone explains to the young

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<sup>351</sup> *Traversée*, 192. *Crossing*, 158.

writer that his idealistic days are over and describes himself as a failed *écrivain engagé*.

This attitude of disillusionment is diametrically opposed to the pending and grandiose task announced in the *Eloge* where writers are called: “to finally build a new yet temporary synthesis on the open path of history, our history.”<sup>352</sup> When Lucien puts forward a concept of writing echoing the one found in the *Eloge*, Sancher answers condescendingly:

You’ve knocked on the wrong door, my son. May I call you that? The person you see standing in front of you can only tell of men and women whose lust for life has been cut short.... No glorious struggle...I’m not who you think I am. I’m more or less a zombie trying to capture with words the life that I’m about to lose. For me, writing is the opposite of living. I confess to impotence.<sup>353</sup>

Condé imagines Sancher’s interlocutor, Lucien—the *porte parole* of Créolité—cry “out in indignation, ascertaining that literature was the necessary extension of a struggle and calling Césaire and his miraculous weapons to his rescue.”<sup>354</sup> Sancher not only bursts out laughing once he hears this, but his disillusioned position vis-à-vis writing constitutes a prelude of the conclusion to which Lucien Evariste will reach on his own as the sun starts rising on the day of the wake. But Sancher is not the only writer in the novel whose failure allows Condé to critique the precepts of the

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<sup>352</sup> *Eloge de la créolité*, 82.

<sup>353</sup> *Crossing*, 83.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*



“demolition group,” to borrow Annie Lebrun’s categorization of Bernabé, Confiant, and Chamoiseau’s program.<sup>355</sup>

Two other writers who attend Sancher’s wake come face to face with their literary failure. But, their failure—their inability to write—also contains the seed of their liberation. For these characters reflect, from different angles, creative solutions to overcome the impasse of an over-theorized and exaggerated politically engaged position of the Antillean writer. Through them, Condé attacks the confusion between literature and politics that has plagued writers in the Global South and calls into question “the sacrosanct notion of commitment” inherited from Sartre and Césaire.<sup>356</sup> Condé surveys the reasons behind their lack of success as a way to deconstruct two central theoretical foundations included in the *Eloge*: the enthronization of Creole as a more authentic language than French to convey the lived experiences of those living in the Antilles and the prerequisite to write for a local audience.

On the one hand, there is Emile Etienne’s unsuccessful historical compilation of *Parlons de Petit Bourg*. The product of two years of labor and all his savings, his book is not only ridiculed by the pedantic intellectuals in La Pointe for its typographical and stylistic mistakes, but it also falls short of selling more than fifty copies. If Emile Etienne is not met with praise, it is because his audience remains the very few critics and intellectuals within his island. It would seem as if Condé is

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<sup>355</sup>Annie Lebrun, *Pour Aimé Césaire*. Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1994.

<sup>356</sup>Maryse Condé, “Sketching a Literature”, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*. New York: Seagull Books, 2014. 213.

proposing that the Antillean artist ought not to write for a select local and reduced audience in mind—as Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé propose—but rather liberate his creativity and venture instead outside of the native land. Whereas Chamoiseau, in his official reaction to *Traversée*, finds fault in Condé’s recurrent use of footnotes and self-explication since for him it betrays a desire to speak to an audience of outsiders (“you are not addressing us, but some other people...How can we construct our own literature if we fail to speak profoundly to ourselves if, at the very moment of writing, we address another people, another culture, other needs?”<sup>357</sup>), Condé, through her characters, defends the writer’s independence from a certain idea of a “native, authentic culture”.

On the other hand, and as it was alluded before, Lucien Evariste’s inability to write in Creole, which had paralyzed his creativity for years and thwarted several attempts to write a novel, gives Condé the ammunition to invalidate two key elements of the literary project detailed in *Eloge de la Créolité* both in terms of the form and the content. Condé calls attention to the fact that Creole is not the mother tongue for every writer and imposing it as the essential route to the imagination only results in creative paralysis. Here Lucien Evariste’s description of his powerlessness is illuminating:

But he could get nowhere, wondering whether to write a historical portrait tracing the heyday of the Maroons or a romanticized saga of the great slave revolt of 1837 in the South. His patriot friends, whom he widely consulted, were just as hesitant... but all bidding him to write in his mother tongue, Creole. Lucien, who at the age of six had

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<sup>357</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau and Kathleen M. Balutansky, “Reflections on Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove*,” 394.

been slapped by both parents for having said out loud the only Creole expression he knew.<sup>358</sup>

As long as he is compelled by the political allegiance with Guadeloupean independence, which dictates the symbolic gesture to write solely in Creole—a foreign language as far as Lucien is concerned—his efforts fail to materialize: “He spent nights drafting outlines of his two novels, only to tear up in the morning what he had gone to great lengths to devise during the hours of darkness.”<sup>359</sup>

And this is why his imagined return to writing—at the end of the wake when he envisions his literary success in Paris— is predicated on first having traveled outside of the island, and second on having rejected the power of accepted ideas. He dreams up a plan to follow the footprints of Sancher across the *Tout-Monde* as the prelude for consigning into writing his friend’s life and experiences. He would visit Europe, America, Africa: “he too would leave this narrow island to drink in the smell of other men and other lands...” he muses, and “instead of hunting down Maroons or nineteenth-century peasants,(...) as an urban son of the twentieth century, he would have to look dangerous truths in the face. He would have to displease...to shock.”<sup>360</sup> And what are these dangerous ideas according to Condé?

For one, the writer’s critical work points to an idea of literature that cannot be confined within any concept or regional manifesto, specially within the one proposed by the creolists. Quoting Maurice Blanchot and aligning her writing with

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<sup>358</sup> *Crossing*, 180-181.

<sup>359</sup> *Crossing*, 182.

<sup>360</sup> *Crossing*, 188-189.

the French post-structuralist tradition she declares in “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer” that

The essence of literature is to escape any fundamental determination, any assertion which could stabilize it or even fix it. It is never already there, it is always to be found or invented again.<sup>361</sup>

This idea is repeated again in “Dangerous Liaison,” her personal contribution to the controversial manifesto that sought to break free from the label “francophonie” and which was published in 2007. With her support for *Pour une littérature monde*, where she denounces the idealization of Creole and claims that every writer must forge her own language, she reiterates her independence from any national language or identification: “I am fond of saying that I write neither in French nor in Creole. I write in Maryse Condé.”

Condé remains cautious about celebrating and sanctifying the notion of an authentic popular culture that would be reflected in her writing since this very same act reifies what for her remains dynamic, intangible, and impossible to represent. This rebelliousness in Condé’s approach to literature, one that insists on entering the theoretical debates of the region, without ever submitting her writing to their dictums, has allowed her to position her oeuvre as both outside and inside West Indian literature. She reminds readers that the writer remains powerless in today’s world, and that the only domain over which she may hope to have an impact is that of literature:

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<sup>361</sup> Maryse Condé, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer.” *Yale French Studies*, No. 83, Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations and Nomadisms, Volume 2. 1993, 134.

What is commitment in literature? A literature that accuses, or quite simply one that lifts the veil and is food for thought and dreams? And what if, as Alain Robbe Grillet believes, the only realm over which a writer can reign is that of his language? Since the Caribbean writer no longer lives in the great white mirage and no longer models his writing on European lines, doesn't a work that manages to subvert the form of the Western novel in its narrative strategy and structure also deserve to be called revolutionary—perhaps more so than any other?<sup>362</sup>

If modernity was truly born in the Caribbean—as CLR James, Sybille Fischer and Sidney Mintz have credibly argued—and the enlightenment ideals of the French Revolution were taken to their logical conclusion in Toussaint Louverture's actions in Saint-Domingue (to the horror and financial loss of European planters, the pioneers of global capitalism), then it is conceivable that the reality of post-nationalism in a globalized world should, and would, also first find articulation in this region of the world. As the site of the first encounter between the old and the new worlds, as well as the theatre where a process of globalization was forced upon its inhabitants, the Caribbean functions as a laboratory for the world's future. Sidney Mintz explains this as both the calamity and the promise of the region, positioning writers such as Maryse Condé in the privileged role of announcers of a world to come since their history and experience contain both

The tragedy and glory of the encounter of the entire non-Western world with the West. But in the Caribbean case, it happened long before it did anywhere else, and under conditions that would prevent its awful novelty from being recognized for what it was a: a modernity that predated the modern. If that is indeed the way the world is becoming, then Caribbean peoples already know it. In their

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<sup>362</sup> Maryse Condé, "Sketching Literature." *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*. 213.

irrepressible spirit, Caribbean peoples may simply be telling us that there is hope for today's modernity, too.<sup>363</sup>

Maryse Condé, as René Depestre before her, anticipates a planetary vision where national borders and linguistic distinctions have ceased to define the creative work of the writer. As the next chapter will show, what started as a premonitory intuition with the Haitian writer Depestre and continued with the deconstruction of false beliefs in Condé, emerges in full force with Santiago Gamboa. Narratives of death, through zombies, mourning and crime allow these writers to convey a radical redefinition of not just of the fields of national literatures but of the spatial way we imagine of the world.

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<sup>363</sup> Kristen Stromberg-Childers, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization and Assimilation in the French Caribbean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 11 Quoting Mintz.

## Chapter Four

### Santiago Gamboa's Poetics of Failure

No es la historia de los países,  
sino la vidas de los hombres

Charles Bukowski, *The Roominghouse Madrigals*

Mysterious corpses, missing persons and puzzling suicides give Santiago Gamboa the creative arsenal to portray a decaying globalized society that no longer can be contained within one set of national borders. Whereas representations of death—via zombies and mourning—allowed René Depestre and Maryse Condé to question and escape the ideological programs and aesthetic formulas of their native islands by unbinding their writing from the bordered frames of reference through which literary production in Haiti and Guadeloupe had been conceived and interpreted, Santiago Gamboa's engagement with the noir detective novel, or *novela negra*, helps the writer to extract his writing from a confining Colombian national field and deepen his generation's rupture with Latin American boom literature. When he locates his writing in a global space and uses the novel as a conduit for dwelling, exploring, and aestheticizing the contradictions of a planetary society, he escapes the burden of a national particularism and positions himself among other great writers of western culture.

While it is true that the break with *Realismo Mágico* and with the aesthetic tenets of the Latin American "boom" encompasses an entire generation of writers who refused to submit to an overused form of writing, which they considered for the

consumption of Europe and North America—where Latin America was erected as a monolithic space of exoticism, flight, and leftist revolution—Gamboa takes this rupture even further. One more time representations of death crack open the container of the nation-state. By anchoring many of his texts outside of Latin America—in cities like Paris, Bangkok, and Jerusalem to name a few—and by giving life to characters from different continents, he challenges the stipulation that Global South artists, presumably writing from the literary periphery, should circumscribe their imagination to representing the political and social condition of the countries of their birth. This is not to say that Gamboa rejects or refuses to acknowledge Colombia and its reality in his writing. After all, every avatar of the writer-narrator found in his novels contains autobiographical elements that point to the author's origins—they are writers from Bogota living abroad as journalists—but rather it's his way of arguing that the writer's nationality should not become the pivotal factor for apprehending the significance of any novel, nor dictating the direction of his writing. To be clear, Gamboa never denies Colombia and Bogota, the place of his birth, but rather dislocates the prominence of this geographical detail to bring out instead the encounter with the *Tout-Monde*. When gesturing towards this new global reality, Gamboa is trying, on the one hand, to understand the new forces shaping the experience of the world, while, on the other, striving to secure his own place in the global imagination.

The glissantian neologism "*Tout-Monde*", which conveys both a perception of a borderless world and a form of cognition where events and people in the most distant of places have reverberations the world over, reflects how Santiago Gamboa



sees the world and renders it in his writing. His attitude towards the world is recognizable in what Edouard Glissant calls the tales of the *Tout Monde* (“les récits du Tout-monde”), a poetic theorization that appears throughout the Martinican writer’s oeuvre as he invites readers and writers to join in a quest for the world:

Les récits du monde courent en ronde, ils ne suivent pas la ligne, ils sont impertinents de tant de souffles, dont la source est insoupçonnée. Ils dévalent en tous sens.<sup>364</sup>

This non-linear assemblage of innumerable influences (“tant de souffles”), stories stemming from the most unexpected places (“insoupçonnée”) that hurtle and swirl into the vortex of the text while heading in the many directions his plots take the reader (“dévalent en tous sens”) correctly describes the way Gamboa carries forth his vision of place in his novels. This is an irreducible conception of the world that is made larger with every character and lacks a center since his plots refuse to remain anchored in one place, continent, or hemisphere.

LE LIEU: – Il est incontournable. Mais si vous désirez de profiter dans ce lieu qui vous a été donné, réfléchissez que désormais tous les lieux du monde se rencontrent... que le lieu s’agrandit de son centre irréductible, tous autant que de ses bordures incalculables.<sup>365</sup>

The richness of the French word Glissant chooses—“Incontournable” does not fully translate into English but it contains both the idea that it is unavoidable, indispensable, and whose contours cannot be traced. This is a sharp shift in focus on Gamboa’s part since, for most of the second half of the twentieth century, Colombian writers sought to grow a national literary tradition by anchoring their

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<sup>364</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Tout-monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993. 71.

<sup>365</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Tout-monde*, 31.

novels within the South American country and by addressing in their narratives the social and political problems affecting their native countries.

If Maryse Condé imagines writers who must face the predicament of their literary failure within a closed West Indian community as the necessary prelude for her own entry into the *World Republic of Letters*, Santiago Gamboa, in a very similar way, puts his character's defeats and tragic destinies to use as a narrative ploy to secure his space in world literature. There is in Gamboa's writing a poetics of failure, an insistence on representing the degradation of a globalized urban space as a way not just to survey the crisis of a world where national frames of reference have ceased to provide meaning and a sense of connection for individuals, but also how this dislocation can be the source for new ways to imagine existence as well.

To better seize Gamboa's commitment to dislocate his writing from a Latin American and Colombian traditions calls for a brief survey of these fields. This abridged look at the region thus precedes the first part of the chapter, which looks at how the novel for Gamboa constitutes a space of crisis. His urban novels, where Paris, Bangkok, Tokyo and Jerusalem become characters in their own right, function as the ideal backdrops for an exploration of a series of crises: the destruction of the concept of Latin American literature; the explosion of the nation-state's borders; the collapse of meaning in the twenty-first century. This priority given to the city is characteristic of the literary genre Gamboa undertakes in his writing. In turn, the second part of the chapter will survey the writer's participation in the rewriting of the Latin American hard-boiled novel or *Novela Negra*. When Gamboa engages with

the tradition that began with Edgar Allan Poe, flourished with Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in the United States and traveled to Ibero-America with Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Manuel Vasquez Montalvan, he is entering a literary conversation that takes him out of the confines of Colombia and connects him with universal literature. This literary dialogue with a host of international writers allows him to participate and prolong the social critique that characterizes the genre. The third and final section of the chapter looks at Gamboa's poetics of failure, which in his fictionalized world constitutes an endless source of beauty where it is precisely the most difficult moments that are also the richest in terms of poetry.

#### **4.1 Neither Realismo Magico nor Narconovelas**

Much has been written about the Latin American boom writers who, inspired by the promise of the Cuban Revolution that seized the imagination of the entire region and responding to the cultural climate of the Cold War, crafted a new literary language to represent—with unprecedented authenticity—a world of social, political and economic contradictions. These utopian fictionalized worlds, where real events coexist with magical occurrences and explain long and tragic national histories, were met eagerly by a disillusioned Western world that wanted to escape its own exhausted imagination and demanded the very same images these writers were too happy to provide.<sup>366</sup> Despite their self-proclaimed affiliation to Latin

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<sup>366</sup> Realismo magico has been heavily critiqued as a literary and marketing ploy that profited from the expansion of a market, or in Angel Rama's analysis the "absorption of literature within the mechanisms of consumer society". Angel Rama, "El 'boom' en perspectiva," *Mas allá del boom: Literatura y Mercado*. Ed. David Viñas. Mexico: Marcha Editores, 1981. For Neil Larson in *Reading North by South: On Latin*

America, writers and their texts were firmly situated in the nation. For two decades, there is a regional obsession with affirming the nation and exploring the foundering of its sovereignty through a mythic reconstruction of reality.<sup>367</sup> For Jean Franco Latin American literature is both a victim and leading protagonist of the Cold War since a large portion of the first part of twentieth century—formative years for the solidification and projection of a national Colombian consciousness in writing—is centered on responding to the cultural pressures of the United States in its application of the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>368</sup>

Although national unity was more a political ideal than a literary reality throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after a period known as *La Violencia* the rise of a national consciousness is reflected in Colombian fiction.<sup>369</sup> The social calamity of a bloody civil war that lasted over a decade (1946-1958) and the modernization of the country's system of transportation—whose absence had kept the nation isolated into four semi-autonomous regions—bring about a sense of national unity, a new vision that finds itself reflected in the country's cultural

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*American Literature, Culture, and Politics*, the Latin American “boom” is an apolitical product of the Cold War's influence in the region and a form of “modernism that, while remaining, as the Old Left might have put it, ‘right’ in essence, nevertheless finds itself for a time in the peculiar historical conjuncture of being ‘left’ in appearance.”

<sup>367</sup> Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002. 7: “though the writers of the 1960s considered themselves Latin American, they were for the most part firmly situated within their respective nations, and the autonomy of the literary work mirrored the ideal of the autonomous nation that was to be restore to the people from whom it had been confiscated.”

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Raymond Leslie Williams, *The Colombian Novel, 1844-1987*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. 17.

expressions.<sup>370</sup> According to Williams, Colombia's literary tradition emerges out of not one, but rather four semi-autonomous regions: Interior Highlands, the Costa, Greater Antioquia, and Greater Cauca.<sup>371</sup> The newly conceived national unity, replacing a long history of regionalism, is reinforced thanks to the unprecedented success and subsequent positioning of Latin America within the *World Republic of Letters*. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's receipt of the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1982, in particular, marks a before and after moment in Colombia writing. His international critical and commercial success across Europe and the United States would further consolidate the idea of a national, authentic, and particular Colombian culture that should and could be portrayed in writing.

Literature was called to reflect the national conditions, in all its perceived magical realist particularities, as the most effective way to secure Colombia's entrance into universal culture.<sup>372</sup> It is worth calling to mind Gabriel Garcia Marquez's jeremiad of 1960 where he bemoans the infertility of a national literary field and accuses Colombian writers of lacking the talent, the will, and the patriotic sentiment to contribute to the novelistic genre that would bring about the emergence of an authentic national identity. His recrimination of a lack of national

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<sup>370</sup> For more information on "La Violencia," the civil war that claimed between 200,000 and 300,000 victims in a period of roughly ten years (1946-1958) see Fals Borda, Guzman Campos, and Umaña Luna, *La Violencia en Colombia*. Bogota: Carlos Valencia Editores, 1980.

<sup>371</sup> Williams explains this atypical feature of Colombia's literature by highlighting the mountainous topography of the Andes and the lack of an interregional transportation infrastructure.

<sup>372</sup> Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "La Literatura colombiana, un fraude a la nacion," *Accion Liberal*, No. 2, April 1960, pp. 44-47. un autentico sentido de lo nacional... la condicion mas segura para que sus obras tuvieran una proyeccion universal".

sentiment and theories explaining the reason why Colombian letters have failed to develop prove prophetic considering he is awarded—thanks to his mythic portrayal of Macondo—the most coveted international prize of literature and utmost sign of universal consecration.<sup>373</sup> Notwithstanding, the unparalleled success of Magical Realism and the stereotypes of a Latin American identity that it erected would prove asphyxiating for an entire generation of writers.

After the collapse of the Berlin wall, the nineties usher a radical and fundamental rupture with the principles of Magical Realism in Latin American writing. In Colombia, “la Generacion Mutante” according to Orlando Mejia Rivera, finds its voice in the encounter with a post-Macondo universe that has yet to be named, shares an intellectual field that is anchored on a renewed faith on realist descriptions, and holds back its political leftist pronouncements.<sup>374</sup> Santiago Gamboa’s “mutant generation” finds echoes in and affinities with other similar redefinitions of Latin American writing across the continent. His work is included in *McOndo* (1996) and *Lineas Aereas* (1999), two regional anthologies whose

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<sup>373</sup> While it is true that Garcia Marquez leaves the national frontier in the short stories *Doce Cuentos Peregrinos* (1992), when the writer stages his narratives outside of Colombia, in European desolate streets and aboard planes next to mysterious beautiful sleeping women, Macondo travels with him. In Luz Mary Giraldo’s formula “Macondo va a Europa.” Luz Mary Giraldo, *Mas alla de de Macondo Tradición y rupturas literarias*. Bogota: Universidad del Externado, 2006. 38.

<sup>374</sup> Orlando Mejia Rivera, *La Generacion Mutante: Nuevos Narradores Colombianos*. Manizales: Editorial Universidad de Caldas, 2002. 36: “este grupo de escritores encontraron otra memoria del ‘agua de tilo y la magdalena’ diferente a la memoria de Gabo y no porque no lo hayan leído o lo rechacen, sino debido a que el universo de Macondo ha sido asimilado como otra gran cosmos de la literatura universal, pero lejano y admirado como se reconoce la luminosidad de las constelaciones de la noche. La generación mutante ha leído a García Márquez, como se lee a Homero, a Joyce, a Proust, a Balzac...su ruptura estética radica en que hallaron su voz narrativa en el encuentro con un mundo literario postmacondiano.”

respective prefaces by Alberto Fuguet and Eduardo Becerra spell out a new theoretical positioning for a younger generation of writers. They both dismiss the reductive portrayal of a rural Latin America and the politically engaged literature of the boom to turn instead towards highlighting the modern urban elements where the individual takes precedence over the community.<sup>375</sup> The year of 1996 also sees the publication of the “Crack Manifesto” in Mexico, which heralds a new era in writing after a period of exhaustion due to—what they consider to be—an obsessive redeployment of the formulaic tenets of Magical Realism.<sup>376</sup> For Hector Hoyos the year of 1989—with the end of the Pinochet regime in Chile and the escalation of Colombia’s violent war of drugs—brings about a profound aesthetic and political change to Latin America, which can be seen in the way writers in the region position their novels in global terms.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Eduardo Becerra Ed. *Lineas Aereas*. Madrid: Ediciones Lengua de Trapo, 1999. XX. “A pesar de los años transcurridos y de los numerosos cambios que los procesos históricos de las ultimas décadas han traído consigo, el narrador de esa tierras es una figura condenada todavía a desmentir ciertos modelos tan arraigados como reduccionistas en el imaginario colectivo de amplios sectores del mundo literario de Europa y Estados Unidos, e incluso la propia Latino América”

Alberto Fuguet Sergio Gomez, eds. *McOndo*. Barcelona: Mondadori, 1996. “No desconocemos lo exótico y variopinta de la cultura y costumbres de nuestros países, pero no es posible aceptar los esencialismos reduccionistas, y creer que aquí todo el mundo anda con sombrero y vive en los arboles... Los más ortodoxos creen que lo latinoamericano es lo indígena, lo folklórico, lo izquierdista.”

<sup>376</sup> Jorge Volpi, Eloy Urroz, Ignacio Padilla, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, Pedro Angel Palou, “Manifiesto Crack,” *Lateral Revista de Cultura*, 70, septiembre 2000. “Hay más bien una mera reacción contra el agotamiento; cansancio de que la gran literatura latinoamericana y el dudoso realismo mágico se hayan convertido, para nuestras letras, en magiquísimo trágico; cansancio de los discursos patriotereros... cansancio de escribir mal para que se lea más... cansancio de lo *engangé*...”

<sup>377</sup> Hector Hoyos, *Beyond Bolaño The Global Latin American Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

For the majority of these writers, this new global positioning means to connect national—extremely violent—local realities with larger, transnational phenomena. Within Colombia, works like those of Fernando Vallejo's *La Virgen de los sicarios* (1994)—an example of the *Narconovela* genre that would spread into global popular culture via TV series like *Narcos*—and Jorge Franco's *Paradise Travel* (2001)—a chronicle about life as an undocumented immigrant in the U.S.—link the shattered lives of those living at the margins of the national urban environment with the international and transnational forces of drug trafficking, informal labor, prostitution, and illegal migration.<sup>378</sup> Notwithstanding the larger scope of their perspectives, these novels remain attached to a national frame of reference, namely that of the author. Gamboa offers a subtle critique of the way certain writers in the Global South exploit human suffering and veil their insistence on representing their national disasters under the guise of a form of political engagement through art. In *El Síndrome de Ulises*, he resurrects the Moroccan writer Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine (1941-1995) as an interlocutor to Esteban in an exchange about the social role of the writer that amounts to a condemnation of those who sell an apocalyptic vision of their countries to the publishing world and international readers:

Quienes venden eso [proposes Khaïr Eddine] a los lectores del Primer Mundo están vendiendo un sufrimiento que no les pertenece. Un dolor que dicen representar y, sobre todo, denunciar, pero del que también obtienen ganancias... ¡Yo lo he visto! Viven muy bien, van y vienen,

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<sup>378</sup> For a closer look at how drug trafficking and its culture of crime entered literature see: Gabriela Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos: Stories from Culiacan and Medellín*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2013; Hermann Herlinghaus, *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.



agasajados en todas partes, y su cuenta bancaria se hincha en proporción al dolor por el cual militan.<sup>379</sup>

This metanarrative moment in the novel reflects on the author's condition as a writer from Colombia, voices his disapproval of the novelistic strategy outlined above, and breaks away from this form of poetics. If Gamboa brings back Khaïr-Eddine—l'enfant terrible of Maghrebian letters reputed for his iconoclasm—from the world of the dead it is to hint at his own quest to chart another route for his writing.<sup>380</sup>

Very early in Gamboa's exploration of the global urban landscape and his insight into the psychology of modern individuals faced with a crisis of meaning, Colombia ceases to be the epicenter of his writing. Although his first three novels—*Páginas de Vuelta* (1995), *Pérdar es cuestión de método* (1997), and *Vida feliz de un joven llamado Esteban* (2000)—take place in Bogotá, where the city reflects the solitude of the characters and their failed hopes, starting with his third novel, the writer introduces a critical distance from Colombia. His protagonist Esteban—Gamboa's alter ego who returns in several of his novels—travels to France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece and from that new vantage point—a window overlooking the Parisian landscape—he returns to his childhood memories and recounts

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<sup>379</sup> *El Sndrome de Ulises*, 254.

<sup>380</sup> Hédi Abdel-Jaouad, "Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine: The Poet as Iconoclast," *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 23, No. 2, North African Literature. Summer, 1992. Pp.145-150.

Colombia's national history with a detachment that only an exile can provide.<sup>381</sup>

This distance increases exponentially in his later novels.

Travel occupies a privileged position in Gamboa's creative universe, matching the writer's nomadic biography.<sup>382</sup> *Los Impostores* (2001) takes place in Pekin where a group of international academics gather to search for a lost manuscript that is somehow connected to the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) and whose reappearance could potentially launch a renewed wave of violence in China. Colombia almost disappears in this novel.<sup>383</sup> *El Síndrome de Ulises* (2005) takes place entirely in Paris, and in it Colombia is reduced to a distant biographical detail of one of the many characters in the novel. With *Hotel Pekin* (2008) Gamboa returns to China and imagines a successful Colombian-American businessman who goes so far as to change his real name to conceal his Latin American roots. The novel looks harshly at the tragic cultural alienation of the migrant, an assessment that is rendered possible through the eyes of a Chinese outsider. He represents the keen observer who can say what otherwise could not be said. Although the writer does return home in his two most recent novels—since both *Una Casa en Bogotá* (2014)

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<sup>381</sup> Santiago Gamboa, *Vida feliz de un joven llamado Esteban*. Barcelona: Punto de Lectura, 2000.

<sup>382</sup> He has published two travel narratives *Octubre en Pekín* (2002) and *Océanos de arena: diario de viaje por Oriente Medio* (2013) where he adds to a genre rarely undertaken by Colombian or Latin American writers. It is also significant that in his "imaginary library" he includes a long list of travel writers. One of the many authors who find their way into Gamboa's incessant intertextual moments is Pierre Loti, the French naval officer and writer recognized for his travel writing. One could write a dissertation solely on Gamboa's use of dizzying intertextuality (sign of his own academic training) but that is beyond the scope of the present work.

<sup>383</sup> Santiago Gamboa, *Los Impostores*. Madrid: Seix Barral, 2002. There is a Colombian character, the journalist (like Gamboa) who finds the manuscript at the end.

and *Volver al oscuro valle* (2016) take place in Bogota and Cali, respectively—the *Tout-Monde* continues to breathe its presence throughout the pages. Every room of the house in Bogota contains memories from different corners of the world while a Europe at the grips of Islamic terrorism, facing an immigrant crisis, and moving towards right wing populism takes center stage. In Gamboa's realist descriptions the reader almost forgets that the frame narrative in these two novels takes place in Colombia. It is the modern global world in all its crises that takes center stage in the novel.

While other Colombian writers like Alvaro Mutis (1923-2013) and Oscar Collazos (1942-2015) have represented travel and dislocation to convey an image of modern despair and social decadence, there is no evidence in their works to give a realist account of the *Tout Monde* with whose encounter their characters would be changed. If the legendary and solitary character of Maqroll el gaviro, the poetic voice of Mutis himself, travels and witnesses the wreckage of a tropical landscape of “la tierra caliente” while pondering on the ruins of civilization, he does so to journey within himself.<sup>384</sup> As for Collazos, travel is inextricably connected to fear, political exile, and the corruption of the national institutions that persecute dissenters for their militancy and ideological positions.<sup>385</sup> His focus is not represent and

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<sup>384</sup> Luz Mary Giraldo, *Más Allá de Macondo. Tradición y Rupturas Literarias*. Bogota: Universidad del Externado, 2006. 57. Writing about Mutis' alter ego, Giraldo notes that: “El viajero Maqroll es un héroe antiheroico que vive su epopeya íntima. En su itinerario se desenvuelve en medio de seres marginales: prostitutas, bandidos, traficantes y truhanes; con ninguno de los seres opuestos con quienes se relaciona y en ninguno de los espacios y lugares a los que arriba deja de ser idéntico a sí mismo...”

<sup>385</sup> Giraldo, *Más Allá de Macondo*, 98-99.

understand the world outside of Colombia and how it dialogues with the characters who encounter it, but to convey their expulsion of the native land.

Much like René Depestre warns Haitians and the black world of the limitations of *Negritude* when fellow Caribbean writers are entirely under the influence of Césaire's poetics, and Maryse Condé rejects the rigidity of the tenets of *Créolité* at the critical apogee of *Eloge de la Créolité*, Santiago Gamboa counters the apocalyptic vision of Colombia (as an exceptionally violent place like no other in the world) that characterizes most fiction published by his compatriots.<sup>386</sup> The writer travels the world in his novels and visits the lowest places of the *Tout-Monde* to remind readers that violence and war are not exclusive to the Global South, or Latin America or Colombia, but is rather felt across the globe as a human, universal plight that has exploded the geopolitical borders that used to organize the world. In *Necrópolis*, Walter Maturana commits suicide in Jerusalem—or is it murder?—after a life of crime, debauchery, and excess within the sordid neighborhoods of Miami. In *Plegarias Nocturnas*, Manuel slashes his wrists while he is being held in the infamous Bang Kwang prison in Bangkok for a crime he did not commit. Realizing he was facing either the death penalty or a life in prison at the hands of the corrupt Thai justice system that would convict him despite his innocence, he takes his own

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<sup>386</sup> Here I am thinking of what Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola maps in Mario Mendoza, Laura Restrepo, Fernando Vallejo, and Jorge Franco's writing as he explores the way Colombian marginality, crime, and pain are traded in the global marketplace of publishing. Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola 'Se Vende Colombia, un Pais de Delirio': El Mercado Literario Global y la Narrativa Colombia Reciente. *Symposium*, Vol 61, Issue 1, Spring 2007. 43-56. "obras como éstas ya han establecido un nicho comercial para un tipo de best-séller basado en novelar las penurias sociales latinoamericanas y ofrecer personajes marginales aptos para el consumo masivo."

life. In *El Síndrome de Ulises*, Nestor and Kim lose their lives in Paris.

Undocumented, marginal, and with little chance to lead a decent and honorable life in Europe, they decide to disappear. With these violent deaths in Israel, Thailand and France, Gamboa shatters the exceptionalist sentiment that has characterized Colombian writing starting with *La Violencia* (*prise de conscience nationale*) and would keep its literature bound to a marginal, inferior position within the World Republic of Letters to represent for the world's consumption echoes of its national tragedies.

#### 4.2 Space of crisis

Las vidas son como las ciudades: si son limpias y ordenadas no tiene historia. Es en la  
desgracia y en la destrucción donde surgen las mejores.

[Lives are like cities. If they're too neat and tidy they don't have a story. The best stories  
come out of destruction and misfortune.]  
Santiago Gamboa, *Necropolis*

The power of the novel, according to Marthe Robert, rests on its absolute freedom while the novelist's ambition remains to force language—via technical manipulation—to sublimate an imperfect reality into the writer's personal vision of an ideal existence.<sup>387</sup> The novel is thus the arena where two versions of reality meet, clash and settle their differences. It is a space of crisis where both personal and collective failures are explored as a way to formulate aesthetic solutions to a human and social impasse. In Santiago Gamboa's fictional universe the world ceases to be organized and divided according to national borders. Straddling several continents both the plots and the characters of his novels refuse to be confined

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<sup>387</sup> Marthe Robert, *Roman des origines et origines du roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.  
19 "Pour le romancier, donc, le roman tire précisément sa force de son absolue liberté."

within the geopolitical boundary lines that defined the world throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Within this constant ebb and flow of people across varying geographies and former demarcation lines—now obsolete—the writer describes a loss of meaning. The city operates as a mirror that registers the geographical transformations that are taking place in the writer's imagination as well as the troubles that come into view in his survey of a globalized world.

His characters in *El Síndrome de Ulises* are immigrants from Colombia, North Korea, Algeria, Romania, Senegal and Iraq, and who have moved to Paris either to chase a literary dream or to escape from a past filled with ghosts. Their dire living conditions in the French capital are but a small improvement from the situations that led them to migrate in the first place. Moving thousands of miles away from home does not solve their situation, in fact, their struggles travel with them as if they were a tragic destiny that chases their shadow. The city becomes a mirror that reflects this decomposition. In its cold and rainy streets, Esteban—the barely surviving writer-narrator—compares his existence to that of the lowest of animals. Gamboa leads the reader into a series of minuscule and derelict interior spaces (la chambrita, a restaurant's underground dishwashing room, and a series of seedy gathering places) to translate an experience of misery in the claustrophobic spaces that constitute the sole respite from the city's cold and rainy weather. The capital of Latin American literature, a city inscribed with a complex web of contradictions, ceases to be the lost Ithaca the writer hopes to return to in order to prove his worth. Paris, the city that for an entire generation of Latin American writers represented artistic validation, inspiration, and aesthetic experimentation becomes a sort of

Hades, an underworld filled with ghosts where migrants flock in the hope of a better life. There, a mysterious disappearance at the beginning and a desperate suicide at the end of the narrative convey the writer's disillusionment, pessimism and a melancholic vision of Edouard Glissant's *Tout-Monde*. But Paris is not the only urban space where Gamboa's novels take place.

In *Necropolis* the writer constructs a modern-day Boccaccio's *Decameron* where a heterogeneous group of people gathers in Jerusalem to attend an International Congress of Biographers and Memory (CIBM) to share their convoluted life stories while the city around them is assailed by war. The relentless strife in Israel is but a metaphor for the violence and conflict that continues to shape human experience across the planet. Irrespective of their different places of origin, the characters share a similar experience of violence. While it is true that each story chronicles a different form of human hostility, at the core they all share the destructive impulse that lives in the hearts of all men. Storytelling in the novel emerges as an island, an aesthetic solution to the crisis of human existence. Jerusalem—the holy site for Judaism, Christianity and Islam—serves as backdrop for endless stories of crime and marginality that allow the writer to shed light into the fault lines of modern society. Colombia, Poland, Italy, the United States may be the different nations where the attendees come from but they are brought together by both their stories of violence and their desire to partake in narrating its details. To this regard Jerusalem functions as the epitome of a world constantly at war with itself. The city carries the wounds of human cruelty and fear as well as its concomitant violence towards those perceived as others, marks of the failure of 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity.

The suicide of one of the conference's attendees, Jose Maturana, a petty criminal turned evangelical pastor in an American mega-church, raises the question among those in attendance of whether his death was indeed self-inflicted or whether it was due to some form of revenge. The writer-narrator decides to pursue an in-depth investigation of the man's life, a probe that becomes, in turn, a literary project in its own right.

Bangkok, New Delhi, Bogota, Tokyo and Tehran are the urban frames where *Plegarias Nocturnas* takes place. Gamboa transports the reader into the smells, sounds, and traffic jams of these cities to bring into view how events across the *Tout-Monde* are inextricably connected. Just like people move across borders, their fears, suffering, and dreams travel with them, ignoring the geopolitical boundaries that governments have put in place. The autocratic presidency of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) does take a central place in the novel (and Gamboa is not shy to decry the corruption and abuse of power that characterized his eight years in office), but the characters he imagines are not confined to the Colombian national space. Instead the siblings, around whom the narrative takes place, travel to Asia hoping to escape the poverty, injustice and criminality of their country only to meet similar forms of corruption thousands of miles away. Manuel's tragic suicide minutes before the consul is able to reunite him with his sister Juana—moments before he would have learned that his defense strategy had a chance to work—conveys both his desire to escape a hostile world and an ultimate act of rebellion against the injustices he had endured his entire life. In the suicide note he leaves behind in a Bangkok jail, he explains how his death constitutes a sacrificial gesture intended to



liberate his sister of her difficult past. With his death, Gamboa highlights the impotence of a man vis-à-vis a dehumanized corrupt system that crushes the innocent individual without any regard for justice. The fact that in the novel it is the Thai judicial system who bears direct responsibility for Manuel's suicide, and not the political environment of Colombia, dislocates the narrative of the South American nation as the core and generator of crisis for its citizens.

Gamboa proposes to transmute, through writing, the cities included in his novels. Paris, Jerusalem, Bogota, Bangkok, Delhi, and Tokyo, all the gritty places he insists on including in his texts would be replaced with cities akin to those imagined by Arthur Rimbaud in "Adieu" where the utopian and alternate universe of literature would allow the artist to escape the hell that is empirical reality. Every one of his novels describes the birth of a book, a literary project that would carry out this romantic, aesthetic transformation. The inclusion of the French poet's well-known verse of farewell in the epilogue of *Plegarias nocturnas* is significant because with it Gamboa aligns himself with Rimbaud's quest of transcendence via art and spells out a similar *profession de foi* in art's ability to transform reality: "Et à l'aurore, armés d'une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes"<sup>388</sup>

#### 4.2.1 Death in the "Underbelly" of Paris

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<sup>388</sup> Gamboa closes his novel with Rimbaud's romantic farewell verse from "Adieu" included in *Une Saison en enfer* as a nod to the French writer whose disappointment with the world inspired a poetic language that would change the course of French poetry. Santiago Gamboa, *Plegarias Nocturnas*, 286.

*No habia nada hermoso en esas tardes grises y heladas, y por eso las calles de esta ciudad eran galerías pobladas de espectros.*<sup>389</sup>

By setting his 2005 novel in Paris, Santiago Gamboa is not performing a radical step. Generations of writers throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries inscribed Paris in their fiction as part of their strategy to forge an independent national literary tradition in Latin America.<sup>390</sup> A mutable construct, the city evoked, on the one hand, the French political philosophy that motivated independence from Spain and thus represented an artistic ideal of freedom and emancipation, while, on the other hand, it embodied the utmost symbol of European values and its concomitant cultural subjugation, against which many Latin American writers sought to formulate their otherness. This contradictory relationship to Paris, according to Marcy Schwartz, reflected the double bind of an imagination that wanted to affirm an exotic otherness while at the same time wished to claim a certain familiarity with Western culture.<sup>391</sup>

What is radical in Gamboa's representation of the city is how this contradictory and ambiguous approach, which characterized entire generations of

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<sup>389</sup> Gamboa, 194.

<sup>390</sup> See Julie Jones, *A Common Place: The Representation of Paris in Spanish American Fiction*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998 and Marcy Schwartz *Writing Paris: Urban Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999. For both Jones and Schwartz Paris provides an aesthetic construct that allows writers to explore, challenge and counter their postcolonial and marginalized position vis-à-vis Western culture.

<sup>391</sup> Marcy Schwartz *Writing Paris: Urban Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999. "When writers expose Paris as an embodiment of elaborate cultural fantasies, they activate a fictional urban construct to debate the perpetuity of European cultural norms and economic dependence despite the end of overseas rule. This debate hovers around the contradictory images of exotic otherness and affirming familiarity."

writers before him, dissolves in his narrative. The postcolonial and politically charged relationship towards the city is upended when the writer transforms the French capital into one more location of the *Tout-Monde*. A place like many others across the Global North that accepts migrants from every walk of life and from every corner of the Global South to fill its lowest paying jobs—positions its own citizens refuse to take. No longer idealized as source of freedom or artistic promise, nor rejected as a former site of various forms of cultural imperialism, Paris comes into view as a vapid, cold and dreary urban jungle where staying alive claims every bit of energy for those at the margins of society. And for some, as it is the case with Nestor and Jung in *El Síndrome de Ulises*, survival ceases to be possible. It is to transport the reader into the decomposition of a globalized and borderless *Tout Monde*, into its underworld of death, that Gamboa sets his novel in Paris.

Old values crumble in Gamboa's fictional universe. Once the writer establishes the historical and symbolic position of Paris within Latin American letters (as its capital and legitimizing center), he proceeds to describe the degradation that befalls upon the Latin American men and women whose former literary glories wane and lead them into thankless teaching positions in France. For it is necessary to bear in mind that while the writer narrator Esteban and fellow graduate student Salim do travel hundreds of miles from Colombia and Morocco to pursue advanced degrees in Latin American literature—at the highly regarded Sorbonne—once they reach their destination, they are met with former literary luminaries who find themselves in pathetic roles of professors of Spanish. The fact that the narrator and Salim travel to France—not a Spanish speaking country—to

study Latin American literature spells out the position the city has had in consecrating its writers and carving a place for the region's writing in the World Republic of Letters. Notwithstanding, Gamboa deconstructs any romanticized notions of the city as the center of Latin American letters. His description of one of the professors at the Sorbonne, the ailing and decrepit Argentinian writer who is struggling to survive, is revealing.

Uno de ellos era un argentino de setenta años, novelista, critico que cine y exitoso autor teatral en Buenos Aires (eso nos decía). Por pudor no diré su nombre per les aseguro que era dramático verlo por los corredores con una bala de oxigeno portátil, respirando a través de una cable que se insertaba en sus fosas nasales. Como buen porteño siempre se vestía muy elegante y usaba sombrero, pero al fondo la realidad era la misma, y era la der ser un profesor muerto de hambre.<sup>392</sup>

The man's physical condition is not unlike the idea of Latin American literature: they both remain alive by artificial means—the oxygen tank—and their end, despite its postponement, is within sight. This critical gaze upon the tragic fate of a certain idea of Latin American writers in Paris—an idea that took root during the Latin American boom—is coupled with a persistent return to the detailed account of three run-down sites where most of the narrative takes place. For the city reflects more than the destruction of the idea of Latin American literature.

Paris also conveys the explosion of national borders. Three recurrent interior spaces illustrate how new forms of community are born in a globalized space where the place of one's birth has ceased to be the grounding of identity. La chambrita, the Spanish and diminutive rendition of the French word for room

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<sup>392</sup> *El Síndrome de Ulises*, 13.

“chambre,” reflects the dreadful living conditions of immigrants in the city; the basement of the *Goelins de Pyonyang*, where the restaurant’s dishwashing activities take place, chronicles the physical demands put on those working at the bottom of the social pyramid; and the seedy bars and dirty living rooms where the narrator and his friends gather to drink, forget and escape through their debauchery the harshness of their life, these insalubrious gathering places illustrate how new bonds are weaved once national borders have ceased to contain experience.

Gamboa frequently returns to a description of the tiny room where Esteban lives among its crumbling contents, in order to contrast an external—idealized—vision of Paris with the interior—real—experience of the writer narrator. Everything within the “chambrita,” (more fit to house pigs: it is called a pigsty “pocilga”) mirrors how difficult conditions are for those who migrate to France, a miniature portrait of their new life in the city.

Atravesamos Paris besándonos y al llegar a la rue Dulud, cuando el taxi estaciono frente al portón y ella dijo, qué edificio tan bonito, pensé que se iba a sentir defraudada al ver mi chambrita, la colchoneta en el suelo, la bolsa de dormir de cremalleras rotas y todo eso que, en el fondo, no era otra cosa que mi vida.<sup>393</sup>

If Paris still functions as the backdrop for erotic encounters, the city of light ceases to be represented through the classic romanticized descriptions where its majestic grand boulevards, historic golden bridges over the Seine, and iconic manicured public gardens take center stage. Instead, Gamboa leads the reader through a world of misery, hunger, and dereliction, an underworld where immigrants face the

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<sup>393</sup> Santiago Gamboa, *El Síndrome de Ulises*, 76.

poverty, indigence, and decadence of an urban Global South at the heart of Europe—the Global North—after fleeing their native countries for political and economic reasons, or to pursue a literary career. The building that houses Esteban's room is beautiful when seen from the outside, in keeping with his former ideas of Paris, but once inside there is only a sleeping bag with torn zippers on top of a cushion (not even a real mattress). The room reproduces the disappointment Esteban must face everyday as he confronts his dream of becoming a successful Latin American writer in Paris with his reality as a low paid dishwasher and undervalued Spanish teacher.

*El Síndrome de Ulises* assembles an international cast of characters who come together in Paris in their pursuit of an elusive dream of success only to join a community of outcasts who live in conditions worse than those of animals and bond around their hardships. Esteban explains how their lives are predicated on some future success and feed on absurd yearnings:

Los que habíamos llegado por la puerta de atrás, sorteando las basuras, vivíamos mucho peor que los insectos y las ratas. No había nada, o casi nada, para nosotros, y por eso nos alimentábamos de absurdos deseos.<sup>394</sup>

The novel constitutes a space of crisis where the writer also explores the struggles of immigrants from the Global South that gather in the French *Ville-Monde* to be free of their nationalities and forge new bonds. Jung fled the autocratic regime in North Korea to find work in Paris as a dishwasher in a restaurant owned by a South Korean man; Lazlo and Saskia have left behind Romania and their failed engineering careers to work as a prostitute and black market dealer; Susy and Désirée provide

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<sup>394</sup> Santiago Gamboa, *El Síndrome de Ulises*, 11.

for their extended families in Senegal by supplementing their income as waitresses at the *The goelins de Pyonyang* through nighttime prostitution along the banks of the Seine; the writer narrator—Esteban—arrives in Paris to follow the footsteps of his literary heroes and is quickly disabused of the romantic version of Paris. Finding work as a both Spanish teacher at “Langues dans le monde” and a dishwasher at the Korean restaurant, he joins ranks with other underpaid but overqualified immigrants. His morning walks across the Bois de Boulogne to the public pool in order to have access to a daily shower, reflect the economic precariousness of his situation and foretell the tragic fate of his best friend Jung:

A las seis de la mañana la bruma se levantaba del suelo y una llovizna empezaba a calar los huesos. El frio era tal que a la segunda esquina la mandíbula se atascaba y justo ahí empezaba lo mas difícil, que era atravesar el Bois de Boulogne para ir hasta la piscina publica... una de las primeras veces que atravesé el bosque presencie algo inquietante. Un mendigo había muerto de frio durante la noche...<sup>395</sup>

Esteban’s witnessing of a random corpse in the park, whose frozen hand forces the emergency personnel to use ice breakers to liberate it from its prison, anticipates his friend Jung’s desperate decision to commit suicide at the end of the novel as an ultimate form of liberation.

The two meet and forge a sincere friendship as they work together cleaning dishes. Amidst the awful smells, toxic soaps, and unending pace of dirty plates, they tell each other their sorrows, failed dreams, and future projects. Using the filthy and constraining basement as yet another recurring—and extremely symbolic—backdrop of the dire conditions of migrants, Gamboa makes palpable how much

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<sup>395</sup> *El síndrome*, 14.

their hard work takes a toll on their bodies. It represents a Hades where death slowly consumes their health. He describes the job as the lowest occupation one can undertake:

Entonces fui a lo mas bajo, que eran los trabajos de lavado y secado de platos en restaurants, algo asqueroso que obligaba a estar en contacto con la grasa y los restos de comida, canecas de desperdicios devorados por los microbios, aguas repletas de salsas y jugos...<sup>396</sup>

And it is precisely in their shared physical hardship that the narrator ceases to be bound to his native Colombia to belong instead to the international Parisian underbelly where migrants from every corner of the Global South come and share their experiences trying to survive. In their newly formed bond there is both the commonality of struggle and the forgetting of past notions of community. Gamboa's characters leave behind their nationalities and defy linguistic, religious, racial and geopolitical divisions to develop new friendships.<sup>397</sup> Their suffering and dejection binds them just like any nationality would bring together individuals in an "imagined community."<sup>398</sup> Esteban acknowledges the dislocation from a national

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<sup>396</sup> *El Síndrome*, 50.

<sup>397</sup> Religious differences are not obstacles to forming solid bonds of friendship: Salim, the Muslim student from Morocco, joins Esteban at a bar during the holy month of Ramadan, despite his own observance of fasting and does not object to paying for his friend's alcoholic drink. Race is also transcended: Esteban has sex with his Senegalese coworker Susi, a black woman whose beauty Gamboa spends several lines extolling.

<sup>398</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 9. "it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. Renan referred to this imagining ...when he wrote that 'or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.' "



belonging, a form of death vis-à-vis his old ideas of social membership, and witnesses his own re-birth into a post-national identity:

en medio de ese grupo, me atrapó una intensa y opresiva sensación de orfandad, como si en algún punto hubiera extraviado el camino y ahora me encontrara en una órbita lejana, algo así como el Planeta de la Simios, solo que con polacos, rumanos, entiéndame bien, sin racismos de ningún tipo, pero en fin, me dije, mi vida, por propia elección tenía ahora mas que ver con todos ellos que con mis recuerdos bogotanos, y era precisamente eso lo que tenía delante...dejaba atrás una vieja piel, frágil, temerosa, y le daba paso a una nueva, mas fuerte, la piel con la que debía encarar esta urbe cruel y alocada en la que todo el mundo debía armarse para no ser tragado y después escupido en algún maloliente sifón...<sup>399</sup>

He arrives in Paris hoping to make his mark in Latin American literature but finds instead the Tout-Monde. When he asks “para qué diablos vine a Paris?” (Why the hell did I come to Paris?) He quickly finds an answer to his question: “... porque quiero escribir y siempre creí, por influencia de tantos, que éste era el mayor lugar para hacerlo.”<sup>400</sup> As his former vision and understanding of Paris slowly transforms, he also breaks free from the national attachments he initially considered valuable. It is significant that while the group of Colombian exiles welcomes him to the city and initially helps him navigate the new city, their presence fades away gradually and is replaced with newly formed friendships with Kim from North Korean, Salim from Morocco, Saskia and Laslo from Rumania, Susi and Désirée from Senegal.

It is also fitting then that Paris in all its powerful symbolism and privileged cultural position would be the backdrop against which Gamboa takes aim at the myth of Latin American literature. If, as Walter Mignolo has argued in his

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<sup>399</sup> Gamboa, *El Síndrome*, 152.

<sup>400</sup> Santiago Gamboa, *El Síndrome de Ulises*, 194.

deconstruction of the concept of Latin America, the idea of a common culture to the southern part of the continent emerged by and for colonial powers during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a strategy to enclose, prescribe, oppress, and subcategorize the region and its people as subordinate to Europe (and later North America), then Gamboa goes to the source of the idea of a homogeneous field of cultural production (i.e. Latin America) to liberate his creativity from that confining and condescending geographical category.<sup>401</sup> Esteban—Gamboa’s *porte parole*—questions whether the symbolic place he has dreamt about really exists and asks himself where he can find the mythical “Paris” which, once reached, would mean he has successfully “arrived” to the world of letters: “para poder llegar, de una vez por todas, a esa ciudad con la que habia soñado cuando quise venir y que hasta ahora no veia por ningun lado.”<sup>402</sup> And if he cannot find the city he had aspired to all his creative life and had traveled to encounter, it is because he has not yet gotten rid of his preconceived, postcolonial, notions of what a writer is and does. These ideas must first die. And quoting V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* Gamboa makes his aspirant writer declare that his impulse to write is both the most noble and the most castrating because of his education. The narrator realizes that first he has to get rid of his previous ideas of what is a writer—he has to be free of the category of a national or Latin American writer—in order to have access to his creativity.

El impulso mas noble, en aquel marco colonial, había sido el mas castrante. Para ser lo que quería ser, tuve que dejar de ser o salirme de lo que era. Para llegar a ser escritor tuve que desprenderme de

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<sup>401</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

<sup>402</sup> *El Síndrome*, 194.

muchas de las primeras ideas unidas a la ambición y el concepto que me había dado del escritor mi semi-educación.<sup>403</sup>

Like Sancher, Lucien Evariste and Emile Etienne in Condé's novel *Traversée de la mangrove*, Gamboa's writer in *El Síndrome de Ulises* faces the question of what it is writing, and what it means to write? If Condé uses her character's confrontation with mourning to liberate herself from the constraining regime of Creolité, Gamboa puts to use his writer narrator's encounter with crime and murder to articulate his ideas vis-à-vis creation and to separate his own writing from a supposed Colombian or Latin American tradition. Esteban sums it up in the following monologue:

Supuse entonces que cada escritor forja su tradición y su propia teoría de lo que debe ser un escritor...¿qué escribir? Lo repetí en voz alta, dirigiendo mi pregunta hacia el techo, ¿qué escribir? Nadie respondió, aunque si ocurrió algo y fue que el teléfono se puso a sonar... Era Kadhim"<sup>404</sup>

Esteban may not have a prompt answer to his question nor a theoretical frame to structure his writing, but he heeds the phone call from his Moroccan friend. The immediacy of the phone ringing and his subsequent literary project to write a novel that would describe the lives of his fellow Parisian immigrants, including Kadhim, functions as an answer to Gamboa's rhetorical question. The story of those who live in the underbelly of Parisian society is what ought to be told, in other words, his encounter with the Tout-Monde is the substance of his writing.

Kim's suicide at the closing of the novel, when he decides to jump from a window, combined with Gamboa's cinematic rendition of the final scene where the narrator recalls Fellini's *Clowns* and compares himself to the lonely clown left

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<sup>403</sup> *El Síndrome de Ulises*, 175.

<sup>404</sup> *El Síndrome*, 176.

onstage at the end of the movie, sum up Gamboa's portrayal of the tragic and solitary condition of the immigrant. Like the clown, he hides his misfortune and vulnerability behind a mask of tenacity, is forced to perform pathetic and thankless acts to live, but holds on to his rebellion.<sup>405</sup> Kim ends his life as an ultimate act of revolt. Dead, he will no longer have to pay the debt he entered into in order to secure his wife's clandestine journey into France from North Korea—a repayment that would have forced him to work for free for the remainder of his life. Gamboa takes on the role of Fellini as the filmmaker “attempts to create a meaningful vision amid a grotesque and humorless reality”.<sup>406</sup> The third section of this chapter will look at how along with the decomposition Gamboa has been intent on depicting with the descriptions of Paris *El Síndrome de Ulises*, the birth of a literary project also takes place. Faced with the collapse of meaning, characters launch, like Gamboa himself, the writing of a new novel. Much like Fellini's *Clowns*, Gamboa's attempt to transform the grotesque reality of the immigrant, outcasts within the *Tout Monde*, into a meaningful vision through literature.

#### 4.2.2 Jerusalem, A Martyrized *Ville-Monde*

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<sup>405</sup> William J. Free, “Fellini's *I Clowns*” and the Grotesque,” *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol.3, No. 2, *Film as Literature and language*. April, 1973. 218, 227: “The clown, wherever he appears, has three identifying traits: his mask and costume, his comic actions, and his rebellion” ...Fellini accepts his own obsession with clowns in a world in which the clown is dead and the grotesqueness of the artist's attempt to create a meaningful vision amid grotesque and humorless reality.”

<sup>406</sup> Free, 225.

*La guerra, siempre la guerra al principio de todo. Lo importante es lo que se hace después de ella, una vez que se logra construir la paz.*<sup>407</sup>

In *Necropolis* Santiago Gamboa brings together of a group of biographers from different corners of the planet to translate, from varying vantage points, the ways violence is the leading force shaping human lives. Whether from Poland, Colombia, Italy, or the Hispanic ghettos at the heart of the United States, his characters have witnessed a world in crisis where crime and death have pushed them to the most extreme of places to find some form of meaning in their lives and make sense of the turmoil around them. The raw thrill of pornography, the charismatic promises of an evangelical preacher at a megachurch, the wild justice of plotting one's revenge, and the contained drama as well as the cold and abstract excitement of a chess game capture the very pascalian, human need to divert from the imminence of destruction and death. Jerusalem, one of the oldest cities in the world and a metaphor for a planet at war with itself, is portrayed as constantly assailed by violence. The city functions as the ideal setting to explore how human cruelty is universal and counter the exceptionalist perspective that sees national wars—in particular Colombia's long civil conflict—as unique.

Much like Gamboa uses Paris in *El Síndrome de Ulises* to translate the disappearance of an idea of Latin American literature and the crumbling of

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<sup>407</sup> Santiago Gamboa, *La Guerra y la paz*. Bogota: Debate Penguin Random House, 2014. In this essay Gamboa explores the reasons behind Colombia's fifty-year old civil war and the 2016's peace talk negotiations with the FARC to put it within a larger, universal perspective. "El odio es el más antiguo principio de las guerras porque éste sí, se puede adecuar a cualquier circunstancia, época o lugar. Es ecuménico y, cómo el espíritu en la Biblia, 'sopla dondequiera'."

affiliation through national membership, with Jerusalem the writer explores the human will to destroy one another, irrespective of nationality. To highlight that violence is universal and Colombia's civil conflict is one among many is aimed at dislocating the centrality of one set of national conditions in writing and free the artist from the burden of having to represent the particularities of his birthplace.

Metonymically, the title of the novel suggests an ancient city of the dead, in this case, a burial site for the very idea of the nation as the exclusive prism through which one should understand culture, literature, and reality. Gamboa could not have set his novel in a more symbolic site considering that Jerusalem although a contested capital, belongs to no nation. Both Palestinians and Israelis have been fighting since the inception of the Jewish nation over the right to control the city. Christianity, Judaism and Islam consider Jerusalem a sacred city, have used it as symbol of their faith and expect to witness there the realization of God's plan on Earth. Men and their beliefs have laid claim to this Middle-Eastern city and thus inscribed it with all the symbolic weight of religion.<sup>408</sup> And yet, this is a city that belongs to the world and cannot be exclusively claimed by any one religion or nation. The hilltop compound in Jerusalem's Old City that watches over the novel, the Temple of the Mount, encapsulates the palimpsest nature of this site, a quality that has fueled endless debates.<sup>409</sup> It represents the most sacred site in Judaism as

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<sup>408</sup> Tamar Mayer and Suleiman Ali Moura, *Jerusalem: Idea and Reality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>409</sup> The most recent being the Unesco's resolution of October 12, 2016 where the language used to refer to the contested Holy site gestured to its connection with Islam by using its Arabic denomination *Haram-al-Sharif* and ignoring the Jewish

well as the third most sacred site of Islam: *Haram-al-Sharif* for Muslims who believe it marks the ascent of the prophet Muhammad into heaven as well as the site of the sacrifice by Ibrahim of his son Ishmael, while for Judaism it is the location where God gathered dust to create Adam and where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove his faith.<sup>410</sup> Christianity also memorializes the Temple Mount since it alludes to Jesus's new covenant with men, symbolically proclaimed when he chased the moneychangers out of the temple. Claimed by all and controlled by none, Jerusalem provides the ideal backdrop for the writer's dislocation of a narrative of violence that would be exclusive to one nation.

The first time the nationless city comes into view, it appears as a space of constant crisis. The sights, smells, and sounds reflect the endless pace of war. Upon approaching the old walls of the contested city, a capital shared by Muslims, Jews and Christians alike, the narrator offers the following description:

Delante de mi estaba la ciudad.  
Decenas de columnas de humo, negras como chimeneas de vapor, se elevaban hacia el cielo en la zona oriental. Eran incendios. A lo lejos se escuchaban sirenas y una gran actividad defensiva. Había trincheras y *check points* por todos lados, hombres armados, nidos de ametralladoras, férreas alambradas, sacos de tierra en las terrazas, muros perforados, estructuras de acero chamuscadas, cemento renegrido por las explosiones.<sup>411</sup>

[There in front of me was the city.  
Dozens of columns of smoke, as black as funnels, rose toward the sky in the eastern area. They were fires. In the distance, sirens could be

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name in Hebrew Har HaBayit Yasmeeen Serhan, "The UNESCO Controversy Over Holy Land Sites". *The Atlantic*. Oct 14, 2016. [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com)

<sup>410</sup> Wendy Pullan, Maximilian Sternberg, Lefkos Kyriacou, Craig Larkin, Michael Dumper, *The Struggle for Jerusalem's Holy Places*, London: Routledge, 2013. 11.

<sup>411</sup> *Necropolis*, 58. *Necropolis*, 58-59.

heard, and a great deal of activity was clearly going on in defense of the city. There were trenches and checkpoints on all sides, armed men, machine gun nests, barbed wire, sandbags on the balconies, walls with holes in them, structures of scorched steel, concrete blackened by the explosions.]

He cleverly juxtaposes the sight of smoke from recent bomb explosions darkening the skies with the sounds of emergency responders attempting to contain the deadly carnage. These contrasting events within the city reveal what for the writer are the two human contradictory instincts: survival and destruction.

Every story gathered in the novel, although taking place in different parts of the planet, replays the violence and the sufferer's desire to retell his experience. Storytelling, as the last section of this chapter argues, is for Gamboa the only way to contain the chaotic experience of globality and last hope for meaning in a world of chaos. Jerusalem may be the gathering place for the men and women whose life stories Gamboa imagines in *Necropolis*, but the city's never-ending turmoil and complicated political conflict are not exclusive to this nationless capital. The writer narrator explains:

Es solo una guerra mas, aunque bien podría ser la metáfora de todas las guerras, de la frustración y el desacuerdo, del odio, la lejanía; todo eso no son mas que palabras y en cambio las balas son bien reales, se meten en la piel y dañan órganos, perforan, mutilan... Hay una perversa lógica o un destino humano que conduce a la guerra sin que los individuos puedan evitarlo.<sup>412</sup>

[It's just one more war, although it could well be a metaphor for all wars, the frustration, the discord, the hatred, the separation; but that's just words, whereas bullets are quite real, they pierce the skin and damage organs, they puncture and maim... There's a perverse logic, a human destiny, that leads to war, and individuals to do nothing to stop it.]

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<sup>412</sup> *Necropolis*, 163. *Necropolis*, 164.



By deconstructing the violence of Jerusalem, that is by analyzing its root causes, reducing its magnitude to its constituent parts, and reinterpreting it as one more war among many, Gamboa paves the way to do the same with Colombia's long history of violence.

It is important to recall the pivotal role that violence played within the development of a national consciousness among Colombian writers and how it forged a national literary tradition.<sup>413</sup> As a constitutive element of its literary space, violence also instilled a sense of exceptionality in the country. It is against this attitude of perceived uniqueness that Gamboa chooses to dislocate the nation from the heart of violence and distance his own writing from representations where Colombia and its relationship with the world can only be seized through the prism of drug trafficking, guerrilla violence, and its paramilitary counter violence. When he describes violence across the *Tout-Monde*, in all its brutality and spine-chilling coldness, he challenges the provincialism of writers who see Colombia's situation as unique. There are more stories to tell and a larger perspective to take when it comes to literature, according to the writer, which is why the life within ghettos of the United States, the workings of the European porn industry, and a nameless war where Polish and Swede soldiers lost their lives are weaved together into one novel alongside details of Colombia's conflict.

By allowing a multitude of voices— from different walks of life and distant geographical locations—to tell a variation of the same story of violence and

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<sup>413</sup> See Williams.

suffering, the writer breaks open the container of the nation and liberates his own position as Colombian writer from a tragic form of exceptionalism. And if violence is not endemic to just Colombia or its national history, but represents instead a human drive, it opens the path for the writer to locate himself within a larger universal point of view. To this regard, narrator's comments at the beginning of the novel, as he reads the attendee's biographies, anticipates the parallels between all the stories in the novel:

Los invitados y sus estrafalarias vidas parecían sacados de obras de Tennessee Williams, esos dramas portuarios donde todos están ebrios y desesperados, donde mujeres y hombres se anhelan con violencia y todo es profundamente trágico...<sup>414</sup>

[The delegates and their bizarre lives seemed straight out of a play by Tennessee Williams, one of those waterfront dramas where everyone is drunk and desperate, women and men endlessly lust after each other, and everything is profoundly tragic...]

This first impression of a pervading sense of tragedy in the "*international*" gathering of writers is an accurate representation of what is made public knowledge during the congress.

When Jose Maturana brings to life both the streets of his native Miami and the prison life at Moundsville penitentiary in West Virginia—where he was held for robbery and murder—he brings to the foreground, in the vulgar language of the streets, the level of degradation and savagery human beings are capable to reach. Prostitution, drug addiction, and murder are the daily fodder in a world where human life has ceased to have much value. Saved by a controversial and eccentric preacher who visits the lowest places in the hope to inspire a renewed sense of

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<sup>414</sup> *Necropolis*, 27. *Necropolis*, 28.

meaning in the lives of those at the margins of society, Maturana is delivered from his addictions thanks to his blind, but short-lived faith in Walter de la Salle, a modern-day Christ figure.<sup>415</sup> There is a baroque exaggeration in Gamboa's superposition of social ills assailing the inner cities of America. There are so many scenes of brutality—in the most crude of languages—that no taboo remains untouched in Maturana's tale.

In a different continent, but faced with very similar extreme conditions of brutality, a Polish soldier by the name of Fereck Oslovski finds himself the victim of torture at the hands of a group of soldiers whose language he cannot understand. Gamboa zeroes in on the brutality to set up one of the mirrors, in a house full of mirrors that reflect off each other how cruelty, survival, and power are part of the fabric of human experience. This scene of torture anticipates others to follow as echoes across the distance. Oslovski's vulnerability and imminent sense of having only a couple moments to live is matched with the brutality of his captors.

Lo maniataron, amenazándolo con rifles puestos contra su nuca... Lo acostaron en una mesa agujerada, coja y con oxido, y empezaron a hacerle preguntas... Quien hacia las preguntas hablaba hebreo y lo primero que hizo fue apagarle el cigarrillo en el estomago. Oslovski pegó un grito de dolor. Después vino algo mas desagradable con las uñas. Le levantaron la del meñique usando astillas de madera...Uno de los hombres se fijo en sus testículos...Sin soltar sus testículos el

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<sup>415</sup> Jose Maturana presents him as a young man of the streets, covered in tattoos and long hair, but also endowed with the ability to reach the hearts and minds of the marginal youths living in the inner cities with a message of God's salvation. His first disciple, Jessica, recognizes him as a new version of Jesus, the anointed one. "Jessica estaba llamada a ser su María Magdalena... ella fue la que se refirió a el en términos divinos, lo de ser un ungido entre los hombres, y diciéndole, tu no eres humano...tu eres un Cristo.." *Necrópolis*, 44.

verdugo había hecho el primer corte, una hendidura limpia y profunda en el muslo...<sup>416</sup>

[They tied his hands, threatening him with raffles pressed to the back of his neck...They laid him naked on a rusty, rickety table full of holes, and started asking him questions... The man who was asking the questions spoke Hebrew, and the first thing he did was to put out his cigarette on Oslovski's stomach. Oslovski screamed in pain. Then came something rather more unpleasant with his nails. They removed the nail from his little finger with wooden splinters...One of the men stared at his testicles... Still holding his testicles, the torturer had made the first cut, a clean deep fissure in the thigh...]

In addition to the violence described above, there is the also writer's technique of a *mise en abîme* that reflects on the nature of memory, storytelling and the human need for fiction. Since it is the French biographer attending the Congress (Edgar Miret Supervielle) who recounts Oslovski's torture. There are at least two narrative instances framing the story of violence since Supervielle arrives to the story via an article he had read in the *Chicago Tribune* and now deems worthy of retelling to the congress attendees. This plurality of narratives levels, creating a box within the box effect, is deployed several times in *Necropolis*. Gamboa's creative process of embedding every story within another and contains the writer's landmark metanarrative moments, spaces that give him free reign to reflect, not without irony, on the nature of storytelling, readership, and reception.<sup>417</sup> This strategy is repeated when Gamboa presents the stories of his two other Colombian characters.

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<sup>416</sup> *Necrópolis*, 186. *Necropolis*, 187-188.

<sup>417</sup> *Necropolis*, 104-105. With ironic undertones, Gamboa includes the long monologue of Lottman, the sought after editor of Tiberiade, who spells out what the publishing houses and the market are seeking among writers. All the writers listen carefully as they want to know what type of fictions would have a readership: "aquel capaz de adecuarse a los gustos del publico sin por ello renunciar a su propio magma creador, a su mismidad... el que sabe nadar en las revueltas aguas del gusto

Despite the fact that Gamboa displaces Colombian history and politics from the center of the narrative in *Necropolis*, he is still interested in representing the violent conflict of his native country. With the two stories told by Moises Kaplan—his own and the one he writes for the event—Gamboa comes to grip with the subject matter of the nation's political and social violence, topics that remain for many of his contemporaries the central axis of their engagement with literature.<sup>418</sup>

In the chapter entitled “El Sobreviviente” (the survivor) Gamboa engages with the current events of Colombia. He portrays the scenes of desolation and brutality that became commonplace in the country as a result of the war between the guerrillas and paramilitaries for control of the territory.

Creo que era Usiacurí, pero en realidad podía ser cualquiera de estos pueblitos tristes de Colombia, las casas arrasadas, la plaza central hecha un mar de ceniza y escombros, la iglesia como una antorcha ardiendo, el almacén de abastos destruido, convertido en humo... pisando escombros y campesinos muertos y niños muertos, calcinados por la quema...<sup>419</sup>

[I think it was Usiacurí, but in reality it could have been any of those sad little towns in Colombia, the houses had been razed to the ground, the central square was a sea of ash and rubble, the church was like a burning torch, the general store had been turned to smoke... treading on rubble and the charred bodies of peasants and children...]

This scene of death spells out the indiscriminate destruction as well as the innocence of the victims. It is told by Moises Kaplan, a businessman from a Jewish

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popular sin que se note mucho, sin estridencias... lo que le permitirá protegerse de acusaciones y denuestos que le lloverán de boca de escritores anticuados, los cuales lo tildaran de oportunista, de vendido e Iscariote, puta del oficio y todas esas cosas que dicen los resentidos, los que no venden, los fundamentalistas de la tradición...”

<sup>418</sup> Mario Mendoza, Laura Restrepo, Jorge Franco, Fernando Vallejo, among many others.

<sup>419</sup> *Necrópolis*, 241. *Necropolis*, 245.

family who, for four generations had been building an empire of fabric and clothing stores in the Quindío region, but was forced into exile. After refusing to pay the paramilitaries, and corrupt politicians behind them, what amounted to extortion money to be able to remain in business, he saw no other solution but to flee the country. Before saying goodbye to his native land, he makes public the corruption he witnessed and destroys the political careers of his enemies as a form of retaliation.

From abroad, he dreams of his old homeland and writes fiction to exorcise the pain of forced exile. The stories he imagines revolve around the idea of plotting an elaborate and successful revenge, probably to live out his own fantasies of avenging the crimes committed against him. When Kaplan introduces another voice and another story—that of Ramón Melo Garcia, one more victim of Colombia's civil war—Gamboa's polyphonic narrative multiplies once again within the house of mirrors of *Necropolis*.

Gamboa rewrites Alexandre Dumas' *Count of Montecristo* when Kaplan imagines a modern day Edmond Dantès turned bitter and vengeful after he has discovered the betrayal of his friends. The parallels are obvious: An innocent man, who is wrongly accused of treachery, loses his freedom but escapes through a tunnel in the middle of the Colombian jungle to collect a treasure with the help of a priest, which allows him in turn to carry out a well-executed revenge. Gamboa nestles Ramón Melo's voice within that of Kaplan's when he concludes:

No sintió ganas de llorar, o mejor dicho no le vino el llanto, aunque estaba triste. Todos habían sido víctimas... La venganza había sido lo mas importante de su vida; en cierto modo había vivido los últimos años para eso y ya estaba completa... Había cumplido su misión y podía irse sin remordimientos, como se estaba yendo ahora de un país que lo había echado a patadas, para siempre, pues supo que jamás volvería.<sup>420</sup>

[He did not feel like crying, or rather, no tears came, even though he was sad. When you come down to it, they had all been victims... Revenge had been the most important thing in his life; that had been his only reason for living in the last few years, and now it was over... He had accomplished his mission and could leave without remorse, as if he was saying goodbye to a country that had kicked him out, forever, because he also knew that he would never return.]

It is remarkable that although Gamboa highlights the deep sense of injustice and desire for vengeance experienced by his Colombian characters, he does so to connect them with the outside world. By stressing the psychological effects on its victims rather than focusing his attention in the particular brutality of the acts, and dialoguing with the high cost of vengeance—the way Dumas did—Gamboa refuses to remain enclosed within the nation. What is more, in the way he concludes this particular story, with Ramon feeling defeated despite his successful vengeance, Gamboa shows the futility of vengeance.

### 4.3 Novela Negra<sup>421</sup>

Santiago Gamboa joins a larger and recent Latin American trend that, following the footsteps of Borges, seeks to elevate the detective novel, which had

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<sup>420</sup> *Necropolis*, 280. *Necropolis*, 287-288.

<sup>421</sup> Demetrio Estébanez Calderon. *Diccionario de terminos literarios*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999. "Denominación que se aplica a un subgénero narrativo (relacionado a la novela policiaca) que surge en Norteamérica a comienzos de los años veinte, y en el que sus autores tratan de reflejar, desde una conciencia critica, el mundo del gansterismo y la criminalidad organizada, producto de la violencia y la corrupción de la sociedad capitalista de esa época."

been relegated as a mass-market and popular tendency, into a genre with considerable literary value.<sup>422</sup> For Gamboa, the *novela negra* is a vehicle to travel the world, critique contemporary society, and partake in a literary preoccupation with narrative forms. From its inception, the genre participates in a transatlantic and transnational phenomenon that bridges the gap between different languages, national borders, and literary traditions. For Glen Close, Edgar Allan Poe himself personifies the triangular nature of the genre when he highlights that Poe, as its precursor, is born in Boston, is educated in England, lives in Philadelphia, but situates the foundational text—*Murder in the Rue Morgue* (1843)—in Paris.<sup>423</sup> Despite its American ties, the detective novel does not find a fertile ground in the Americas, and it is not until the 1920's, with the commercial success of *Black Mask* magazine, that other American writers contribute and refashion the genre to carry out a critique of contemporary society. This faculty to survey with a critical eye the traumas and tensions found at the bottom of society, conditions that other forms of the novel fail to grasp—or refuses to tackle—sets in motion a renewed interest of the *novela negra* in Latin America and Spain.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> In 1942 Jorge Luis Borges publishes “La Muerte y la brújula” in *Sur* and participates in the translation of a series of British detective novels with Adolfo Bioy Casares that leads the Argentinian publishing house Emecé to create the series *El Séptimo Círculo*. This series would introduce the work of Raymond Chandler to Spanish speaking audiences.

<sup>423</sup> Glen Close, “La Novela Negra in a Transatlantic Literary Economy,” *Iberoamericana* (2001-) Nueva época, Año 6, No. 21. Marzo 2006, 115-131.

<sup>424</sup> Gustavo Forero Quintero, “La Novela de crímenes en America Latina: Hacia una nueva caracterización del género.”



To better seize how Santiago Gamboa joins this regional trend and exploits its possibilities of a transnational genre that explores social decomposition while it remains self-conscious of its literary practice, we will return to the three novels we have looked at so far. In *Plegarias Nocturnas* the consul's investigation of Manuel's crime allows Gamboa to hurl his characters away from Colombia and into India, Thailand, Tokyo, and Iran. In *Necropolis*, the mysterious death of Jose Maturana opens the door for a critique of twenty-first century post-capitalist society as the writer narrator probes into the motives of the former pastor's apparent suicide. Through the self-aware novel *El Síndrome de Ulises* Gamboa looks at what it means to write and remains concerned with form as his protagonist attempts to solve the riddle of Nestro's disappearance.

When Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler set out to capture the degradation of a North American urban environment from the perspective of the solitary individual that faced the oppressive weight of the social, political, and financial consequences of Prohibition, the Great Depression, and the Wall Street Crash, the Hard-Boiled genre was born. Theirs was a rewriting of the detective genre that began with Edgar Allan Poe's imagining of the character of Auguste Dupin as he first appeared in *The Murders of the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Mystery of Marie Roget* (1842), and *The Purloined Letter* (1844). The eccentric, intuitive and keen observer of other men for whom no riddle was impossible to solve is both the precursor of Chandler and Hammett's detectives and the forerunner to Gamboa's writer-narrators in *El Síndrome de Ulises* and *Necropolis* and the Colombia consul in *Plegarias Nocturnas*. Poe's successors would transform the backdrop—from the

upper echelons of society to the lowest rings of American gangsters and to a globalized metropolis peopled with migrants—in order to carry out a critique of their contemporary world. Chandler praises the transformation carried out in Hammett’s writing for its return to realism since “he put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used” while demonstrating that “the detective story can be important writing.”<sup>425</sup> For Chandler the hardboiled genre’s capacity to decry the contradictions of society all the while conveying a sense of humanist redemption is what corroborates its place as a work of art. Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Manuel Vasquez Montalban, and other novelists seize this idea when they endeavor to rewrite the rules of the genre to fit a Latin American reality.<sup>426</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Crime in the Tout-Monde

The revision of the North American hard-boiled in the *novela negra* appeals immensely to Santiago Gamboa for whom the city, as we already saw, had become a mirror that reflects the foundering of old ideals. He is particularly drawn to the narrative ploy of the detective novel where an investigator must survey—and physically visit—the “scenes of the crime” to uncover the mystery. The crime that preoccupies Gamboa’s writer narrator in *Plegarias Nocturnas* takes place in several

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<sup>425</sup> Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1950.

<sup>426</sup> In an interview with Carla Fernandes, Taibo explains that he wants to break the barrier between high and low culture by writing the city and going to the places other writers refuse to enter. His project returns to a new form of politics since it places the novel as a socially engaged form of literature that resists North American cultural influences by hijacking a genre that served Hollywood to colonize the global imagination. Carla Fernandes, “Entretien avec Paco Ignacio Taibo II”.

geographically dispersed cities in the *Tout Monde*, which come together through complex political and economic relationships. The novel is made up of a series of sketches cleverly bound together to portray the political and paramilitary crisis in Colombia during the Alvaro Uribe presidency, an international network of sexual traffickers luring young women from Latin America towards Asia, and the drug trade in Asia. After the consul meets Manuel in prison and commits to help him find his sister Juana, his diplomatic role changes dramatically. The writer narrator in the novel becomes a political detective on a global scale given the different nations he visits, the criminal organizations he discovers, and the connections he uncovers as he searches for the missing woman.

From Bangkok he goes to New Delhi, Tokyo, Tehran, and Bogota in his quest to find her and attempt to defend Manuel in court. The novel can be seen as journey through parts of the *Tout-Monde* that examines poverty and caste in India, the profitable international networks of prostitution controlled by the Yakuza in Japan, the institutionalized mistreatment of women in Iran, ending with an in depth exposé of Uribe's "false positives" in Colombia, before returning to Thailand—where the narrative begins and ends—to survey the Thai's criminal justice system. What is remarkable is how Gamboa manages to link several crises of the contemporary world in one novel in what appears as a tortured journey of one individual across the Tout-Monde.

So how does Santiago Gamboa connect these geographically distant realities in one novel? He imagines a character like Juana who decides to leave the country

after she has grown dissatisfied with the corruption of the government of Alvaro Uribe and the complacency of its citizenship when it does not recoil to learn that his government was engaging in “death squad tactics” to consolidate further political control of the nation.<sup>427</sup> She had been working as an escort in Bogota and upon witnessing a public march in the streets of Soacha decides to infiltrate the national security service to become a female avenger and take justice into her own hands.<sup>428</sup> But her plan turns out to be more than dangerous than she had anticipated and to escape them (since they wanted to kill her for the information she held against them), she accepts a questionable deal to travel to Tokyo to expand internationally her work as a prostitute.

The images of solitude and alienation in Tokyo, a city Juana had imagined through Murakami’s work, confirm that the deal to travel to Asia was a trap. Gamboa allows the reader to get lost in the traffic of Tokyo, see its gardens, and witness the changing of the seasons as a dramatic backdrop against which he reveals that Juana had indeed become a victim of a ring to human traffickers. The poetic beauty of the city is coupled with a violent underworld of sex.

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<sup>427</sup> The “false positives” scandal in Colombia involved the secret, but government sanctioned, strategy of the armed forces of inflating the number of guerilla casualties in their battle. It was used to measure and demonstrate the military’s success in gaining terrain in the war against the guerrillas. Michael Evans, “ ‘Body Count Mentalities’ Colombia’s ‘False Positives’ Scandal, Declassified”. *The National Security Archive*. [www.nsarchive.gwu.edu](http://www.nsarchive.gwu.edu) January 9, 2009.

<sup>428</sup> This character is very much inspired on Stieg Larsson’s heroine Lisbeth Salander, the protagonist of the Swedish trilogy: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *the Girl Who Kicked a Hornet’s Nest*. Juana describes her plan to the consul as follows: “Yo iba a ser su angel vengador... Me infiltré en el DAS... Me convertí en su puta... Preferí venderles el cuerpo en vez del alma, que es lo que todos vendian en ese asqueroso país.” Santiago Gamboa, *Plegarias Nocturnas*, 217.

Gamboa puts on display a human gallery of the victims and victimizers of a transnational economy that treats female bodies as commodities. Her pimps in Bogota and Tokyo may have been from two very distant cultures and behave differently on the surface, but they are driven by the same human greed. The workings of both rings of prostitution, in their inhuman treatment of the women, constitute a mirror and metaphor for the values of late capitalism across the globe. The denigration the women willingly subject themselves to combined with the rapacious nature of the business reflect how lust for wealth knows no bounds. The writer makes clear that Juana's character had learned early in her life that her body and beauty were to be traded in the world, which explains why he imagines her escape her Japanese captors by turning to her sexuality: her only weapon. After seducing her Iranian bodyguard in Tokyo, with whom she has a child and runs away, she finds herself prisoner of another set of humiliating conditions. This brief detour via the Islamic Republic of Iran allows the novel to extend its commentary on the situation of women globally. In particular how modern cities, like Tehran conceal their background treatment of fifty percent of their population.

This consideration for how women are treated around the globe remains a central concern for Gamboa in the novel. Although the frame narrative takes the point of view of the Consul who leads his investigation from the safe distance of his diplomatic position, it is with Juana's first person account of her life that the writer delves deeper into the tragedy of human trafficking. Her character is the more psychologically developed in the novel and once she is given a voice, all other characters take a secondary role. In addition, while the Consul initially gets

involved in the siblings' case because Manuel has been imprisoned in Bangkok when Juana comes into the picture, she becomes the one who needs to be rescued and Manuel ceases to be the center of the plot. After all, it is Juana's footsteps across the *Tout Monde* that both the narrator and the reader are following in *Plegarias Nocturnas*. This explains why Gamboa would end the novel with her mysterious disappearance after Manuel's suicide and with a puzzling cinematic reference for the readers to decipher. By including in the epilogue a scene description of the film adaptation of Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, Gamboa not only gestures at the influence the American romantic realist writer had on the writing of this novel, but also may be hinting at how, like Fitzgerald's novel, Juana's story is left unfinished.<sup>429</sup>

#### 4.3.2 A Meaningless World

In *Necropolis*, Gamboa uses Jose Maturana's unexplainable death in his hotel room as the basis for plunging into the world of a renewed and peculiar form of faith and religiosity among those at the margins of society. His death launches an investigation that gives Gamboa's ironic pen the opportunity to survey a new form of religion among the desperate: the blend of a self-centered spirituality with an evangelism obsessed with wealth. This new form of belief, according to the novel's logic, emerges in a condition of crisis and offers to repair the brokenness of its believers. To investigate what is really behind the claims of these new forms or

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<sup>429</sup> This reading about Juana's unfinished story is confirmed since Gamboa brings her back in *Volver al Oscuro Valle*, Bogota: Penguin Random House, 2016. Scott F. Fitzgerald, and Matthew Joseph Brucoli. *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

religion, and what those who believe in them find so appealing, Gamboa imagines a writer narrator who takes on the role of detective across a world where religion takes the place of money, sex, and power in man's quest for meaning in the twenty-first century.

He looks with a critical eye at the global and growing trend of megachurches that are based on a charismatic pastor whose personality appeals to those who are suffering from the social effects of a world driven exclusively by secular, market values. This is a transnational phenomenon according to the novelist. Although pastor Walter de la Salle emerges out of a Hispanic ghetto in the United States, he transcends national frontiers and exports his unorthodox form of religion to several countries in Latin America.<sup>430</sup> The revival of this form of religion, according to Gamboa's novel, provides those living within the margins of the *Tout-Monde* with the opportunity to hold on to the illusion of hope and redemption in a world that does not offer much. The dialogues, rich in the language of the streets, combined with the descriptions of the showy and ego-driven personality of the pastor, reveal the desperation of those living amidst the degradation of the inner cities across the globe.

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<sup>430</sup> Gamboa makes this abundantly clear when he opens Jose Maturana's presentation at the Congress with the pastor declaiming a long string of identity labels and even more so when he describes the ministry's "business" expansion into Latin America. *Necropolis*, 31: "Soy venezolano y nací en Santo Domingo... Soy panameño... soy cubano... Nací latino en Miami... Soy nica, tico, dominicano y Boricua. Soy cachaco y veneco. Soy plebe y rasta y soy escoria y vengo de la mara y soy paraco y traqueto y estoy en la pesada. Soy negro y zambo y cholo, mestizo e indio... Soy caribeño. Soy latinoamericano."

The recent rise of fundamentalism across all religions has been linked to a modern phenomenon driven by the desire to replace the uncertainty of rapid changing times of globalization with a reassuring form of certainty. Karen Armstrong explains that “militant piety” should be seen as a global and fear-driven response of the disposed who, having absorbed the pragmatic rationalism of modernity—governed by reason and technology— have confused two aspects of religion.<sup>431</sup> A need for clear-cut answers and the inability to tolerate ambiguous questions—when *logos* replaces *mythos*, if we follow Armstrong’s argument— creates an environment fertile for the proliferation of distorted forms of spirituality. In addition, income inequality and the longing of those at the bottom of society to partake in the riches of the opulent class have fueled the growth of a prosperity gospel movement in the United States and the Global South. In *Blessed*, Kate Bowler maps how American prosperity gospel “turned to the cross as the solution to all human needs (where) Jesus’ death and resurrection abolished not only sin and disease but also poverty.”<sup>432</sup> These trends discussed by Armstrong and Bowler illuminate the contemporariness of Gamboa’s indictment of the present.

Through the novel’s external structure, Gamboa makes obvious that one of the central preoccupations of *Necropolis* is to survey how a world in crisis produces

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<sup>431</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. London: Harper Collins, 2000. xvii-xviii: “In the premodern world both *mythos* and *logos* were regarded as indispensable...Both were essential... complementary ways of arriving at truth...in the modern world... because an increasing number of people regard scientific rationalism alone as true, they have often tried to turn the *mythos* of their faith into *logos*.”

<sup>432</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.



aberrant forms of religion. He spends half of the first part of the novel recounting how Jose Maturana's life in the United States changes after his encounter with the church called "El Ministerio de la Misericordia" (led by Walter, the charismatic preacher) and the third and final section of the novel revolves in its entirety around the writer narrator's investigation of the reasons behind the former adherent's premature death. With the help of the *novela negra*'s keen investigator, the reader discovers that after growing disillusioned with the church's activities—that is once Jose had recognized the financial motivations of its founder whom he calls a false messiah—he publishes a series of damaging exposés on the movement.<sup>433</sup> This detail casts doubt on whether Jose had really committed suicide at the King David hotel or was killed by another member of the church, in retaliation for his public pronouncements on the church and the idealized founder.

In Gamboa's portrayal of the movement—the pastor, the church services, and its business model—there is a desire to highlight the contradictions contributing to its growth and ridicule this form of religious revival. He locates its origins in a modern social decomposition tied to increasing income inequalities, institutional racism, and the near absence of values in a world where money is the sole measure for the good. Men and women were not intended to live in such a world, according to the writer, which is why they desperately seek an escape from reality. Drugs and promiscuity are some of the ways they alleviate the pain of having to live in a dehumanized world, a world that has ceased to make sense. Gamboa's cartoonish

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<sup>433</sup> *Necropolis*, 124. "mas se levantaba del suelo su iamge de redentor y mas me parecia a mi un falso mesias, lleno de flaquezas y apegado a cosas banales y con una creciente egolatria..."

depiction of the religious movement is intended to bring these ideas to the fore as explicitly as possible.

The physical appearance of Walter de la Salle and his ability to translate a message of redemption into a modern world of despair displays the coming together of two distinct worlds—urban crime and religion. It is the man's charisma and acuity to understand the culture of the streets that propel his religious movement forward. Gamboa conveys how this two opposing worlds come together in his descriptions of the man:

En sus misas, además, aparecía con el torso desnudo, repleto de tatuajes que mostraban a Cristo allá en Nazaret, sí, pero también en los callejones de un suburbio industrial, predicando entre alcohólicos... Su espalda estaba cubierta por una imagen de la crucifixión de Jesús, pero en lugar del monte Gólgota, el Redentor aparecía colgado de una vieja cancha de baloncesto de Siracuse Drive, al lado de avenidas perforadas y edificios de fachadas sucias por el smog en cuyo interior solo Dios sabe qué dramas ocurrían....<sup>434</sup>

[In addition, he'd appear at his services stripped to the waist, his upper body covered in tattoos that depicted Christ, not only in Nazareth but also in the back streets of an industrial slum, preaching to alcoholics and heroin addicts. His back was covered with an image of the crucifixion, but instead of Mount Golgotha...the Redeemer was hanging in an old basketball court on Syracuse Drive, surrounded by potholed streets and smog-blackened buildings with God knows what dramas happening inside...]

By invoking his understanding of their hopelessness and appealing to the exaltation they all aspire, the pastor is able to channel all the weight of their frustration and unhappiness towards expanding his church.

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<sup>434</sup> *Necropolis*, 48. *Necropolis*, 48.

The church services reported by Walter contain all the showmanship of a professional manipulator who knows how people are suffering and what they are longing to hear. He is appealing to a very particular group of people—the lost and the downtrodden—and knows how to speak their language:

Walter se dejó de hosannas y les metió rock y hasta rap y video clips de música de fondo, e invito a bailarines al escenario pues decía que para predicar en el mundo de hoy había que inspirarse del mundo de hoy, que era el de la calle, con música y sus imágenes duras y a veces violentas pero muy reales... si sus enemigos eran la droga y la violencia y la promiscuidad, el debía enfrentarlos con las mismas armas... Su manejo del micrófono era excelente... con crescendos y disminuendos que doblegaban la voluntad de la gente, y el resto era una opera popular...<sup>435</sup>

[Walter dispensed with hosannas and had music videos in the background, playing rock and even rap, and invited dancers up on stage behind the pulpit, because he said that in order to preach in today's world you had to take your inspiration from today's world, the world of the street, with its music and its harsh, sometimes violent but very real images... if his enemies were drugs and violence and promiscuity, which indeed they were, then he had to fight them with the same weapons... His handling of the microphone was excellent, with crescendos and disminuendos that bent the audience to his will, and the rest was a real pop opera...]

His sermons are not grounded on any Christian text nor in any form of exegesis, but on putting on a show just as exciting as the drugs and sex that would take them away from their reality. In Kate Bowler's formulation to explain the appeal of the prosperity gospel, these forms of religiosity offer "a comprehensive approach to the human condition. It sees men and women as fallen, but not broken, and its shares with them 'a gospel', good news that will set them free from a multitude of

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<sup>435</sup> *Necropolis*, 47, 125. *Necropolis*, 48, 125.

oppressions.”<sup>436</sup> But Gamboa is not as generous in his portrayal of these faith movements.

He depicts the Machiavellian pastor entering the stage—after making the audience wait a long time to generate further anticipation—with the initial fanfare of Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*.<sup>437</sup> The symbolism of this musical detail is not lost on the reader who pictures a man taking advantage of the nihilism of the world around him to crown himself a demigod. And yet, there is humor in Gamboa’s recreation of the scene. For the reader is told that “La gente se paraba en las sillas y gritaba y las mujeres mordían las carteras y se orinaban y había desmayos... hasta que Walter encendía el micrófono y gritaba, Dios los esta mirando esta noche!”<sup>438</sup> Mixing humor with drama Gamboa successfully enters the psychology of both the pastor and its crowd. Despite its location among the urban poor—or perhaps because of it—the church and its evangelical ministry were not intended to alleviate the suffering and material needs of its membership, but followed the model of a business.<sup>439</sup> Walter’s suicide—despite his initial claim of having found a restorative spirituality—conveys Gamboa’s skepticism towards a religious solution to the

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<sup>436</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed*. 232.

<sup>437</sup> *Necropolis*, 125. *Necropolis*, 125: “luego salia al escenario en medio de una nube de humo, con un canon reflector siguiendolo y ponderosa musica sinfonica, nada menos que el *Zarathustra* de Richard Strauss” (and then go out on stage in the middle of a cloud of smoke, with a spotlight following him and loud symphonic music, nothing less than *Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss)

<sup>438</sup> *Necropolis*, 125.

<sup>439</sup> *Necropolis*, 75. “Las arcas estaban a reventar de dólares, podridas de verdes... La gente daba diezmos mensuales y los viajes evangelizadores de Walter, con misas de hasta veinte mil personas, eran un negociazo.... Nos tirábamos un pedo y caían monedas. (121) El ministerio de la Misericordia seguía su imparable ascenso, una institución realmente floreciente... el plano de la primera capilla se había vuelto un modelo y ahora había seis mas”

modern ailment of a lack of meaning. As it will be addressed in the final section of this chapter, it is only art— literature—that can contain the anguish and horror of human experience and transform it into a sense of wonder and marvel according to the writer.

Before his arrival to Wanda's Island, after evacuating Jerusalem to save his own life at the end of *Necropolis* the writer narrator briefly returns to civilization only to realize that modern horror is not exclusive to Israel and the countries at war. In fact, despite all the violence they had witnessed in Israel and despair they had heard at the congress, a greater tragedy was upon them. In the banality and indifference of the glazed gaze of the passers-by, Gamboa recognizes the modern dehumanization of men and women.

No había bombardeos ni humo, ni el agrio olor de las basuras; no había neumáticos ardiendo ni atardeceres en llamas... La ciudad no estaba situada por la guerra, pero si por la banalidad y la indiferencia. El horror no estaba en el aire cargado de polvo y químicos, sino en los gestos de los mas jóvenes, en esos hombres y mujeres que caminaban con indiferencia por el adoquín de las plazas, en la actitud derrotada de los viejos. Ahí estaba el horror...<sup>440</sup>

[There were no bombings or smoke, or the acrid smell of garbage; there were no burning tires or flame-lit sunsets... The city was not under attack from enemy armies, only from the banality and indifference The horror wasn't in the air filled with dust and chemicals, but in the looks of the passers-by, their frozen pupils, the gestures of the younger people, the men and women walking indifferently across the cobbled squares, the defeated attitudes of the elderly. There was the horror.]

And realizing that they had not really escaped danger when they left behind the war in Israel, they decide to find shelter in Wanda's island, a metaphor for literature:

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<sup>440</sup> *Necropolis*, 448. *Necropolis*, 458-459.

Cualquiera de las ciudades de las que proveníamos nos parecieron, de repente, igual de frías e inhumanas. Igual de crueles...Anhelábamos viajar a la isla a la que José había huido, en la que decisión establecer su residencia...un pequeño barco en medio de la tempestad, azotado por el oleaje y las tormentas.<sup>441</sup>

[All the cities we came from seemed to us, suddenly, equally cold and inhuman, Equally cruel...We were going to the island where José had fled, and where he had chosen to establish his residence... a small boat in the middle of a storm, lashed by surging waves and storms.]

But José's refuge is not so much an actual island, but, as he had explained during his presentation during the congress, it was literature:

Me dediqué a devorar libros, poesía y novelas, vidas ejemplares...Leía después de mis visitas a los reformatorios, a los antros de mala muerte y demás lupanares de la ciudad...y lo primero que note es que la vida real era pobre comparada con las vidas de los libros; en los libros había armonía y complejidad y las vainas mas jodidas aparecen con un resplandor de belleza, eso noté al leer a Dostoievski y a Dickens y a Böll...<sup>442</sup>

[I also devoted myself to devouring books, poetry and novels, exemplary lives... I'd read after my Bible-thumping visits to reformatories and crack dens and other places of ill repute in the city... and the first thing I realized was that real life was poor compared with the lives in books; in books there was harmony and complexity and the most fucked-up things had a sheen of beauty, I noticed that when I read Dostoyevsky and Dickens and Böll...]

To compensate for the human degeneracy Jose witnesses in rehabilitation centers, brothels, and seedy gathering places, he reads. He finds shelter in novels and comfort in their beauty, recognizing that art, insofar as it embodies human ideals, surpasses men and women's individual tragedies. Through José, Gamboa pays homage to three masters of realism, writers from Russia, England, and Germany who entered the canon of Western literature and with whom he attempts—

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

<sup>442</sup> *Necropolis*, 127. *Necropolis*, 127.

successfully—to establish a dialogue. Gamboa aspires to Dostoyevsky's psychological complexity to convey the inner turmoil of the individual at a time when national borders have ceased to contain experience, the character development and realist depictions of Dickens to give life to marginal characters living within the underworld of globalization, and the power of Böll to effect a rebirth out of annihilation, a resurrection of meaning in a twenty-first century in chaos.<sup>443</sup>

#### 4.4 La Possibilité d'une Ile

The redemptory quality of writing comes into view in every one of his novels. From the ashes of death in *Necropolis*, out of failure of saving Manuel's life in *Plegarias Nocturnas*, and from within the immigrant's despair in *El Síndrome de Ulises* emerges the possibility of an island. This island is the literary project each one of these novels imagines as one of its characters describes his vow to start a new book. The consul gathers the fragments of his memories of Juana and Manuel in Bangkok to write the book the reader has in his hands; Gaston collects the details about Nestor's life to write the story of an immigrant in Paris; EH, the anonymous writer-narrator in Jerusalem accepts the challenge to write a novel about the life of the dead minister Jose Maturana. Gamboa fictionalizes the genesis of his texts from within themselves as if to rescue his characters from the failure and death his plots had imagined. These self-referential moments within the novels constitute the

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<sup>443</sup> "Nobel Prize in Literature 1972 - Press Release". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 28 Jan 2017.

writer's meditation on the limits—and more importantly—the possibilities of representation.

Much like *Las Meninas* shows Velazquez looking back at its viewers in the painting made famous by Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses*, *El Síndrome de Ulises*, *Nécropolis* and *Plegarias Nocturnas* reveal Santiago Gamboa staring back at its readers. The writer wants to make vivid and palpable the distance between a perverse, cruel, imperfect reality he has put so much effort in recreating and the novel's parallel universe of beauty, completeness, perfection. This is where Gamboa's poetics of failure rests. In the artist's attempt to repair reality, transform failure via the imagination, escape the limits of death and humanity by aspiring to the everlasting immortality of the text. This recourse to self-reflexivity in fiction, according to Robert Alter, is part of long tradition of writers that started with Miguel de Cervantes and rests on a paradox: skeptical of fiction—since they are aware of the limits of representation—they continue to believe in the imagination's ability to change and liberate reality.<sup>444</sup> In this way, Gamboa creates a bond of intimacy with his reader to mark his rupture with Colombian, Latin American and Global South writing. These fictions had self-enclosed the imagination within themes, geographies and problems that rarely ventured outside of their immediate reality.

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<sup>444</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975. xi, Alter defines the self-conscious novel as “one in which from beginning to end, through the style, the handling of the narrative viewpoint, the names and words imposed on the characters, the patterning of the narration, the nature of the characters and what befalls them, there is a consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention.”



In contrast, Gamboa's novels refuse to stay within those geographical parameters and invite the reader to come along with them.

*In Plegarias Nocturnas* this literary project is announced from the first page of the book when the consul describes his need to return to Bangkok and plunges into a long flash-back in order to remember, relive and write down a story that changed his life and find some meaning in his empty life. The book is thus his way to come to terms with the tragic events he could not control and to make sense of his own failure. He explains his need to return to the city as follows:

Vine a Bangkok con el animo de recordar. Ver de nuevo lo que viví  
hace unos años en esta ciudad aunque con otra luz ... Es precisamente  
eso lo que busco: palabras. Reconstruir una historia para contarla...  
Una vieja historia atrapada en una ciudad, que se abre hacia otras...<sup>445</sup>

[I came to Bangkok intending to remember. To look again at what I  
lived through in this city a few years ago, but in another light...that's  
precisely what I'm looking for: words. I want to reconstruct a story in  
order to tell it... An old story trapped inside a city, which opens up  
unto others...]

A book that recounts the tragedy of Manuel and Juana performs two functions: first, it transforms the sibling's failed attempt to be reunited in Bangkok into a poetic memory of their lives. Second, it accomplishes what they had desired from their youth: to escape the confining space of Colombia and see the world, the *Tout-Monde*.

Similarly, in *Necropolis* when Gamboa imagines the birth of the novel in a dialogue between two of his characters, he is calling attention to his own artifice as a novelist. This self-conscious moment, with Sabina Vidovelli commissioning the

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<sup>445</sup> *Plegarias Nocturnas*, 14. *Night Prayers*, 18.

writer-narrator to memorialize the life of Jose Maturana with a novel, allows the writer to invite his readers to believe in the power of stories and come out of a passive form of reading:

No lo convoque únicamente para contarle nuestras batallas, sino porque queremos que se una a ellas, que luche en nuestro lado, que entre a formar parte ... como generador de historias, empezando por la de Jose Maturana... que narre esa aventura... que regrese a los orígenes y a los grandes secretos, que se haga preguntas por lo divino y lo humano y nos indique el camino...<sup>446</sup>

[I didn't ask you here only to tell you about our battles, but because we want you to join us, to fight at our side, to join... as a creator of stories, beginning with the story of José Maturana...We've imagined a movie that tells that adventure, that goes back to the beginnings, to the great secrets of life, that asks questions about the divine and the human and show us a way...]

Whereas Sabina is addressing the narrator, Gamboa is also addressing his reader as if to say “don't be content with just reading, but acknowledge that the lives experienced in fiction can be just as real and powerful as those outside of them.” This constitutes an invitation—on the part of Gamboa—for the reader to believe in fiction again. In a world that has ceased to provide meaning, and has eroded old values amidst the degeneration of human violence, the book emerges as the last possibility to order.

And this is precisely what Gaston spells out at the end of *El Síndrome de Ulises* when he decides to write a book about Nestor's life as a strategy to overcome the deep sense of mourning over this lost friend. Faced with the absurd disappearance of a man he loved, and about whom he knew so little about, he hopes

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<sup>446</sup> *Necropolis*, 385. *Necropolis*, 396.

to bring Nestor back to life through the artifice of the book. He explains to the narrator:

Me basta abrir los ojos y ver el mundo desde mi ventana, desde estos dos ojos que son como mis ventanas, y soportarlo... he estado escribiendo, tal vez sea una memoria, un libro triste pero verdadero, la historia de Néstor...al final el gran regalo de Néstor fue su propia historia... todo lo que estamos obligados a saber y descubrimos después, cuando las personas ya no están...<sup>447</sup>

The loss and failure of human life can only be reclaimed through the imagination and its power to counter death and destruction.

Santiago Gamboa's in depth knowledge of obscure details about cultures geographically distant from his own as well as his comprehensive portrayal of the cities, streets, foods, and small corners of various places in the world are not intended to flaunt a form of cosmopolitanism and detachment from the local, like critics of this "worldly" poetics would like to suggest. Rather, it functions as his creative strategy to make real what has been long considered as an exotic and forbidden place for the Latin American imagination. And although for Gamboa travel is a key element in the nourishment of his commitment to making literature and understanding other men, many of the details he shares with the reader are borrowed from other books, from his own travels of the *Tout-Monde* via literature.

The intertextuality that traverses his works, along with the images, characters, and ideas of Western culture that weave in and out of his novels show that he has escaped the prison of a national tradition that was too confining.

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<sup>447</sup> *El Síndrome de Ulises*, 343.

Santiago Gamboa does not follow a geopolitical ordering of the world, has crossed the linguistic barrier that tends to distance writers, and lives rather in the World Republic of Letters. Self-exiled from Colombia for many years (although he just returned to Cali), an outsider in Europe and Asia for part of his adult life, he has made his home in the *Tout Monde* of literature, or to borrow the French writer's title, since Michel Houellebecq finds several echoes in Gamboa's works, literature has become "La Possibilité d'une île".<sup>448</sup> In this boundless imaginary world, populated by criminals and immigrants, full of violence and bizarre ways to cope with it, linguistic manipulation and creativity strive to substitute empirical reality since, at least according to Gamboa, the writer's work surpasses all other human activities.

As the two preceding chapters have argued, representations of death for two writers in the Global South have functioned as a literary strategy to dislocate writing from a position of postcoloniality. If Rene Depestre deploys the figure of the zombie to release Haiti from the trap of a nationalist discourse grounded on negritude while setting free Haitians from the passive role of Global South victims and Maryse Condé exploits mourning as a space to deconstruct collective myths about racial identity and cultural belonging in West Indian writing to unbind individual creativity, for Santiago Gamboa violent crime and his engagement with *novela negra* allow him to enter spaces unexplored by fellow Colombian writers. He upends the invisible boundaries that had held other writers hostage into representing a national reality, a political climate that never ventured outside of its borders. It is in Gamboa's

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<sup>448</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*. Paris: Fayard, 2005.

commitment to enter the conversation with a world tradition, through the Latin American hard-boiled detective genre or *novela negra* that he breaks from a position of coloniality and proposes a vision of relationship to the rest of the world for writers in the Global South. This poetics of dislocation is both liberating and expansive.

## Conclusion

The writer...must be wary of every Dream and every nation, even his own nation.  
Perhaps his own nation more than any other, precisely because it was his own.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

*Narratives of Death and Violence* has attempted to situate and address the prevalence of themes of death in the literature of the French West Indies and Colombia, underscoring how this recurring theme is not solely intended to denounce past events but rather directs its eyes towards the present and the future. The research brings together representations of death in works by René Depestre, Maryse Condé and Santiago Gamboa around a common preoccupation with releasing the literatures of Haiti, Guadeloupe and Colombia from a condition of isolation vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and its inhabitants from a position of victimhood in regards to history. Zombies in the works of Depestre, the space of mourning in Condé's novels, and the underworld of crime in Gamboa's writing go beyond recounting a national tragedy that traces its roots to colonial and postcolonial conditions. Instead, by exploring death these writers describe the emergence of a global consciousness that does not feel confined by national, linguistic, religious, or geographical frontiers. It represents a new mapping of the world's imagination.

This transnational imagination gets progressively detached from a vision of the world as composed of separate and distinct cultures, and describes how we are living in a universe of accelerating connections between distant geographical places.

Lines or pathways of relationship linking different parts of the globe replace the borders that had kept them apart. The works included in this study document this transformation by thematizing travel and depicting characters whose lives is not bound either to one location on a map or to a native land, but opens instead towards the world. Cap'tain Zombi in *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chrétien* travels to Alabama, the Congo and Chicago. Rosélie in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* settles in Cape Town, but has lived in New York and Paris. Juana's story in *Plegarias nocturnas* straddles several Asian cities: Tokyo, Tehran and Bangkok are the backdrop of her search for her brother.

Such is the logic that underwrites bringing together Haiti, Guadeloupe and Colombia. These three nations and their literatures belong to two separate disciplinary traditions despite sharing comparable experiences of European colonization and a history of common aesthetic preoccupations—finding an *authentic* voice, differentiating their writing from European forms, narrating an *exceptional* national experience. Traveling such a similar road, the French Caribbean and Latin America still find a wedge that separates them. This research project started with the two connected observations that, on the one hand, representations of death had more to say than recounting past wrongs and, on the other, Depestre, Condé and Gamboa shared a similar Global South poetics of dislocation in their writing.

In the preceding chapters it was proposed that a new transnational consciousness finds expression in the fiction of the Global South, and that

representation of death—via the zombie, mourning and violent crime— function as a narrative strategy to render visible this change in perspective.

Chapter one “Dislocation and the Global South” set the stage for launching the discussion by providing a definition of the Global South and how this new concept—conveying a symbolic re-ordering of the world after the end of the Cold War—is both a geopolitical situation and an emancipatory project. The chapter then provided a synopsis of four important imaginative strategies in the French Caribbean and Latin America that preceded the birth of the idea of Global South to demonstrate how Depestre’s, Condé’s and Gamboa’s writing converses with these existing literary practices. Haitian *Indigénisme*, *Négritude*, *Créolité* and *Realismo Mágico* are outlined against a historical frame to contrast how Depestre, Condé and Gamboa withdraw from their own national literary spaces.

Chapter two “The Third Space of Death: Depestrian Zombies and Creolization” shows that Depestre revalorizes the figure of the zombie—an outright negative character in the Haitian imagination— to release Haiti from a position of collective self-loathing and imprisonment. While Haitian writers ascribe a collection of national ills to this liminal figure (alienation, collective impotence, madness, violence) for Depestre, the zombie not only carries the seed of individual rebellion, but also conveys the creative negotiations of the Creole.

Chapter three “Mourning and Betrayal: from Collective Myth to Individual Lucidity” demonstrates how Condé uses grief to deconstruct a series of collective narratives—racial solidarity, racial reconciliation, and the idea of a cultural



community—to liberate the individual from constrictive impositions of a French West Indian society. Only after a painful arrival to lucidity can the individual regain his freedom and re-enter the world. Chapter four “Santiago Gamboa’s Poetics of Failure” establishes that Gamboa portrays crime and death across the *Tout-monde* to counter the apocalyptic vision of Colombia that prevails among his contemporaries. By removing Colombia from the center of his plots, he not only expands the themes and questions available to him as a writer, but also liberates writing from having to portray a national or local specificity.

René Depetre, Maryse Condé and Santiago Gamboa’s efforts to release the creative imagination of the demands of their countries of their birth—as it has been explored in readings of zombies, mourning, and violent crime—allow us to map a gradual and growing transnational consciousness within the Global South. This effort to extricate their writing from having to represent an authentic, politically engaged national experience is the very condition for their participation—as equals—in the *World Republic of Letters* theorized by Pascale Casanova. If the Global South, in its very configuration as a new ordering of the world, attempts to transcend the inequalities of a colonial legacy, then to write away from the native land, to replace notions of *authentic* autochthonous cultures, and to be released from depicting a reality circumscribed by the very borders imposed by a history of colonialism is to successfully challenge its legacy in the present.

*Narratives of death and violence* pushes the boundaries of the fields of Francophone and Latin American studies not just because it brings together two

linguistic traditions, but also insofar as it raises the question of how these disciplines take for granted the nation as a precondition for knowledge, that is, as a natural unit of analysis. Much of our understanding of literature has been acquired through looking at a frame that displays a static image: the nation. As literary critics, how do we study writers who defy these labels? Although this is not a new question since many writers before Depestre, Condé and Gamboa have straddled several cultures, their attitude towards it would seem as if this is a new trend in literature. At a political and historical moment when nations in Europe and North America are tempted by a return to the certainties of a closed nation-state and a retreat within the safeties of national identities—both cultural and geographical—the issues raised by Depestre, Condé and Gamboa offer poignantly relevant strategies for rethinking notions of community and individual freedom.

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